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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S THE FIRST GAME YOU'LL PLAY ON THE PC ENGINE MINI?

DARRAN JONES

Parasol Stars, as it will remind me of the time I found a PC Engine hooked up to an arcade machine while holidaying on Barry Island.

Expertise:
Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine

Currently playing:
Castlevania (N64)

Favourite game of all time:
Strider

DREW SLEEP

I wonder if my Japanese is competent enough to get me through *Snatcher*... well, only one way to find out!

Expertise:
Loud music that'll make Darran cringe

Currently Playing:
Resident Evil

Favourite Game:
Final Fantasy VIII

NICK THORPE

Probably *Sapphire*, since I'm never going to play it on my own PC Engine. I've got the right hardware, but an original copy would cost far too much for me to even consider.

Expertise:
Owning five Master Systems (I sold two)

Now playing:
Raw Danger

Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog

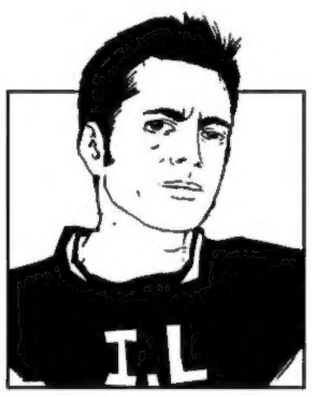
ANDY SALTER

Not played on a PC Engine... wrong sort of PC! I did once own a UK copy of *Snatcher* on the Mega-CD.

Expertise:
Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!

Currently playing:
Europa Barbarorum 2 mod for *Medieval II: Total War*

Favourite game of all time:
Rome: Total War



IAIN LEE

I would play *Snatcher*, simply because my friend Ollie says that it's brilliant.

Expertise:
Buying overpriced stuff on eBay then never touching it

Currently playing:
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars

Favourite game of all time:
Elite (BBC Model B)

PAUL DRURY

I've bought previous mini consoles to revisit old favourites, but most of the stuff on the PC Engine is new to me, so I think I'll start with *Cho Aniki* and *JJ & Jeff* which both sound bonkers.

Expertise:
MC Escher

Currently playing:
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

Favourite game of all time:
Sheep In Space

PAUL ROSE

R-Type, because it never, ever gets old, no matter how many times I play it.

Expertise:
Winging it

Currently playing:
Bugaboo The Flea

Favourite game of all time:
Half-Life 2

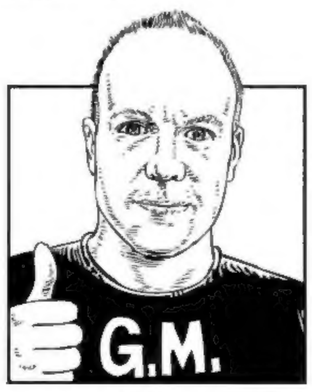
PAUL WALKER-EMIG

I've never really been into scrolling space shooters, but the exception to the rule is *R-Type*. I've always had a lot of fondness and affection for it.

Expertise:
Pretentious indie games

Currently Playing:
A Plague Tale: Innocence

Favourite game of all time:
Metal Gear Solid



GRAEME MASON

Definitely a bit of multiplayer *Bomberman* mayhem with my boys, and I hope things don't get *too* competitive.

Expertise:
Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver

Currently playing:
Midnight Resistance (ZX Spectrum)

Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4

LOADING...

've mentioned it before, but seeing the original PC Engine for the first time had a very profound effect on me.

As a youngster I lived in the arcades, and the thing I craved more than anything else was faithful arcade conversions to play at home. As much as I loved my Amstrad and Master System, they were a little lacking in this area and suggested that arcade-perfect ports were beyond the 8-bit systems of the time. Those early PC Engine shots in (I'm going to say *C&VG*) changed all that for me, and seeing that shot of *R-Type* made me desperately want to own one.

I'd imagine that those early magazine images were the first experience that many of you had of the PC Engine, too, and I wonder just how many of you are yet to experience the brilliance of NEC's little white box of tricks. Well M2's latest mini console is nearly here and it's about to make those early import dreams we had a far more tangible reality. You can read our review next month, but rest assured we've spent enough time with the PC Engine Mini to know that it's definitely something you should be getting excited about. You can read more about our hands-on experience inside, alongside an interview with Hiromasa Iwasaki, who coded for the machine that many of us lusted after.

Enjoy the magazine!

CONTENTS

>> Load 204 Breathing new life into classic games

RETRO RADAR

06 **Stamp Of Approval**
Devs on seeing their games as stamps, while Sam Dyer discusses their creation

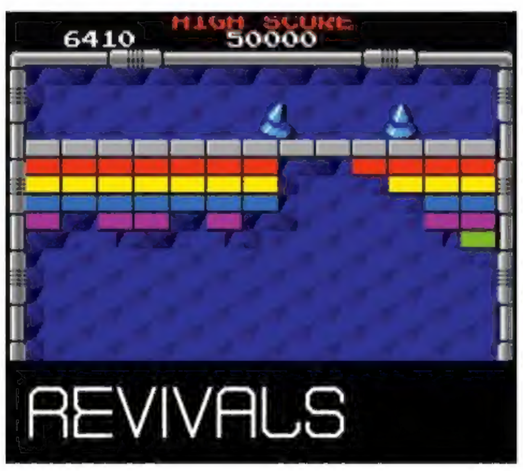
08 **Chuck Peddle 1937-2019**
We pay tribute to the engineer who helped create the 6502 microprocessor

10 **Iain Lee**
This month, Iain remembers meeting the creator of *Pac-Man*

12 **Mr Biffo**
Paul has a soft spot for *Bugaboo The Flea*

13 **A Moment With**
Jun Senoue chats to us about being in the Sonic Adventure Music Experience

14 **Back To The Noughties**
Nick travels to March 2003 and finds that it's quite a dull month



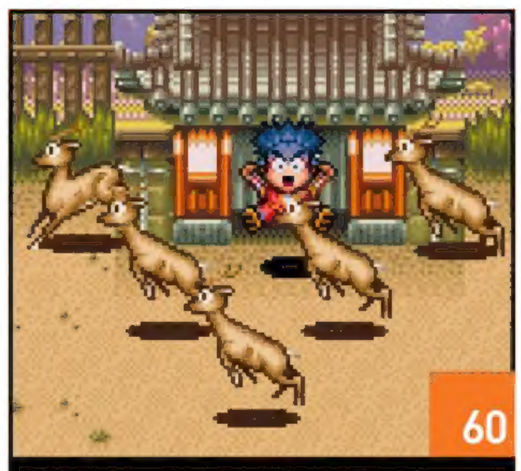
REVIVALS

16 **Joust**
Like Obi-Wan Kenobi, Nick realises that it's all about having the higher ground

36 **Arkanoid**
Guess what happens when you stick an arcade game with a spinner in a school

58 **Super Off Road**
Darran got a SNES game for Christmas. Yes, he is still a massive child

98 **Nintendogs**
Who would have thought that stroking a puppy would cure deadline stress?



FEATURED

30 **Classic Moments: Phantasy Star**
The best experiences from Sega's RPG hit

32 **The Making Of: Footballer Of The Year**
Chris Shrigley on his innovative footy game

44 **Hardware Heaven: Game Boy Color**
Gaze at the beauty of Nintendo's handheld

46 **Ultimate Guide: Dragon Spirit**
Why we love Namco's draconic shmup

52 **Pushing The Limits: Panorama Cotton**
Nick highlights this late Mega Drive release

54 **Minority Report: ZX Spectrum**
Martyn Carroll finds obscure gems for you

60 **Ultimate Guide: The Legend Of The Mystical Ninja**
Revisting Konami's wacky platformer

64 **The Unconverted**
Nick plays Wing War and other lost games

70 **Classic Moments: Banjo-Kazooie**
The best bits, as selected by Darran

72 **From The Archives: Denki**
How this Scottish dev took to the sky

76 **Future Classic: Dead Space: Extraction**
Darran champions this great Wii prequel

78 **The Making Of: Claw**
Learn how a pirate cat came to be

82 **Peripheral Vision: Gamecube Game Boy Player Digital Controller**
This pad is cool, but now very expensive

18

PC Engine Mini: The Legend Returns

We go hands-on with Konami's miniature marvel, and take a look at the games it hosts

The Evolution Of: The Great Escape

John Heap explains how the engine of his 8-bit isometric hit changed with each new game

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92

Desert Island Disks: Jeff Lee

The co-creator of *Q*bert* looks back at his interesting career, including his fascinating time at Gottlieb

The Making Of: Freespace 2

66

Discover how a focused game development led to a critically acclaimed space sim that's still loved today

84

The History Of: Commandos

REVIEWS

100 Psikyo Shooting Stars Alpha
102 Sega Ages: Shinobi
102 Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath HD
102 NBA Jam (book)
102 Sega Ages: Fantasy Zone

ESSENTIALS

28 **Subscriptions**
More exciting than taking on the Bydo empire and destroying Dracula

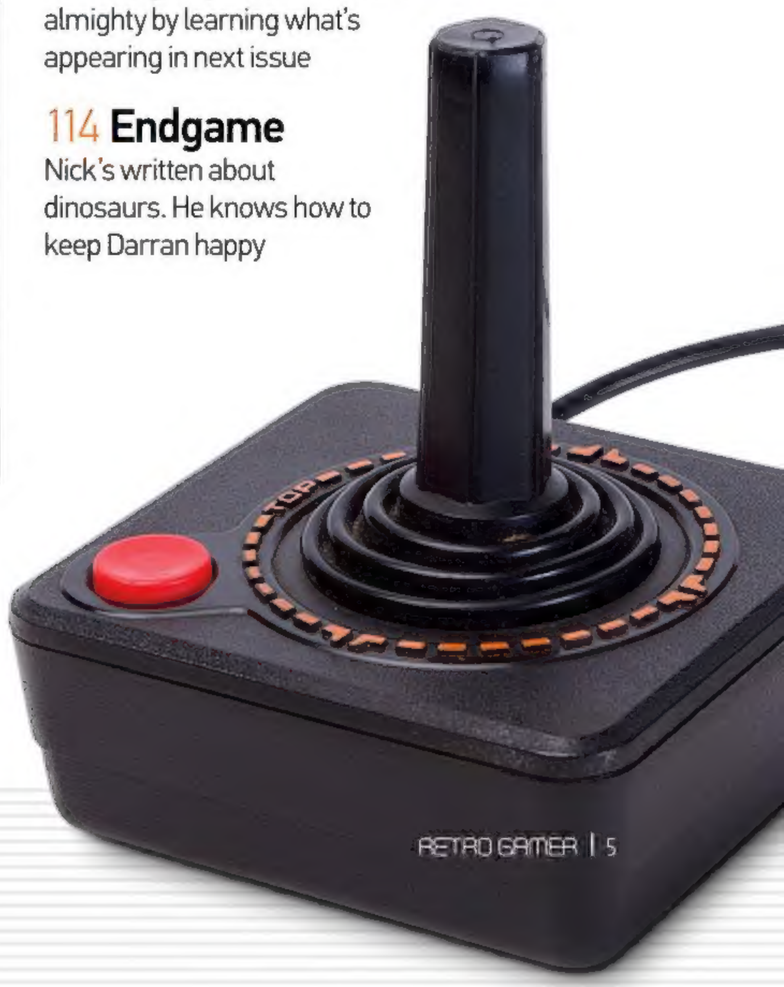
104 **Homebrew**
Jason is back with another selection of modern games to enjoy on classic systems

108 **Collector's Corner**
This month's collector is based in the USA and has recently completed his Nintendo 64 and Nintendo 64DD collections

110 **Mailbag**
Send us a letter by email or snail mail and if it's good you may have a chance of winning a lovely retro book

113 **Next Month**
Knowledge is power, so become almighty by learning what's appearing in next issue

114 **Endgame**
Nick's written about dinosaurs. He knows how to keep Darran happy



» (From left to right) Jon Hare (*Sensible Soccer*), Debbie Bestwick (*Worms*), Philip Oliver (*Dizzy*), Troy Horton (*Tomb Raider*) and David Darling (*Micro Machines*) celebrate the new stamp collection.

STAMP OF APPROVAL

Developers are delighted with Royal Mail's videogame tribute

CONTENTS

6 STAMP OF APPROVAL
Developers weigh in on Royal Mail's new videogame stamp set

8 CHUCK PEDDLE 1937–2019
We pay tribute to the designer of the 6502 microprocessor

10 IAIN LEE
The talkRADIO host remembers meeting the creator of *Pac-Man*

12 MR BIFFO
Paul casts his mind back to a game that he was 'stuck' with

13 A MOMENT WITH JUN SENOUE
Sonic Team's sound director chats about the Sonic Adventure Music Experience

14 BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES
Nick continues his journey through time and space, stopping off in March 2003

The games industry received a nice nod of legitimation at the beginning of 2020 with Royal Mail's release of a new collectible stamp set. There's a focus on *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft with four stamps – as you'd expect for such a culturally relevant character – and it has delighted Lara's creator, Toby Gard, who was completely unaware of the honour. "It's totally awesome," he told us upon hearing the news. "I'm not sure I can think of what's better. Maybe going on a £50 note? Thanks for bringing my attention to this, I've got to frame me one."

Toby will have to act fast, as presentation packs are currently limited to 2,500 copies, meaning they're bound to be in demand when you consider how collectible items within the retro games market can be. In addition to four *Tomb Raider* stamps, eight other games are represented: *Elite*, *Sensible Soccer*, *Worms*, *Dizzy*, *Populous*, *Lemmings*, *Micro Machines* and *WipEout*. It's a solid representation of classic games and the inclusion of *Dizzy* has excited the Oliver twins.

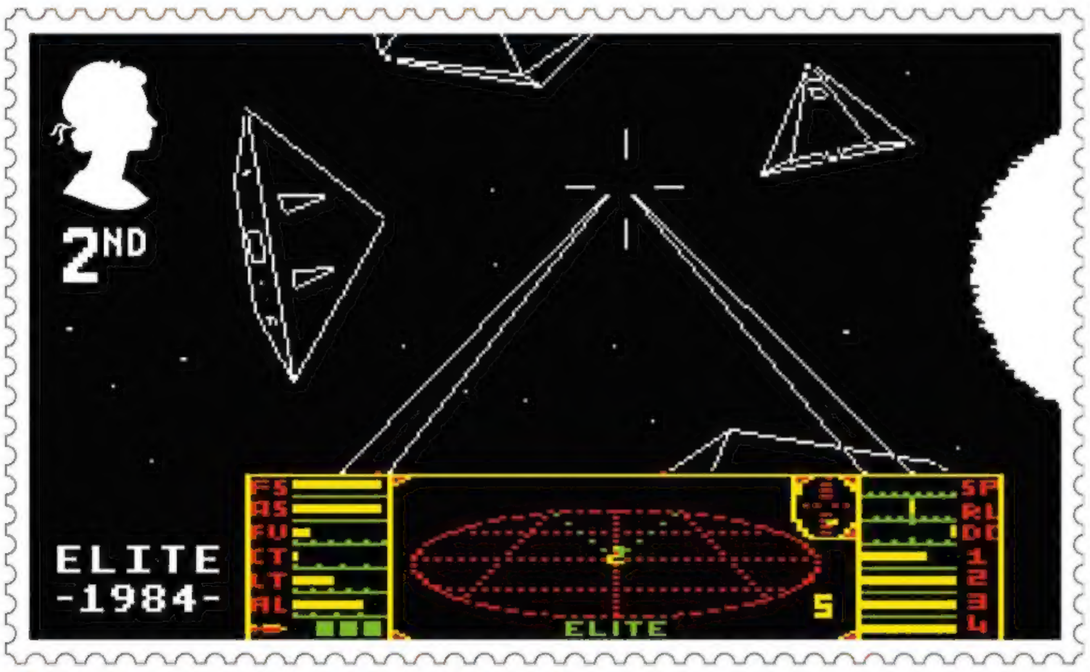
"It was both a surprise and great honour that Dizzy was chosen by the Royal Mail to have his own stamp!" says Philip Oliver. "I think Royal Mail chose Dizzy as he's the mostly fondly remembered UK retro game character. He had an innocent charm, ambition and optimism that caught young gamers' imaginations." David Darling, the cofounder of Codemasters, which has stamp representation via *Dizzy* and *Micro Machines* is also pleased. "It's very weird seeing the game images as stamps, I can't quite get my head around it," he says. "We never would have guessed that might happen when we made the games!"

While developers are clearly delighted with the new stamps, how were they created in the first place? Julian 'Jaz' Rignall has now revealed that he worked on the editorial content of the set's presentation pack, while Bitmap Books' Sam Dyer has also been involved at a high level. "For the past three years, I have shared an office with old college buddy, Jamie Ellul," he tells us. "Jamie runs a design studio called Supple Studio and has worked with Royal Mail for years. When the opportunity came up for Supple to work on a set of special stamps for their videogames issue, it seemed like the perfect time to collaborate, as I could bring my design skills and knowledge of retro gaming to the project. This also appealed to Royal Mail as they always like to have an 'expert' on-board. I also used my trusted contacts to work on the project, bringing in Julian Rignall for the writing, Gonçalo Lopes for screenshots and Craig Stevenson on pixel duties."

With a team in place it was then a case of choosing the actual games that would be represented. "We supplied a long list to Royal Mail which contained around 30 games," continues Sam. "Our main consideration to this list had to be whether, aesthetically, the game would look good on a stamp. The final eight were ultimately chosen by Royal

» Sam Dyer (far right) and the Supple Studio team hard at work. Supple has been creating stamp designs for the Royal Mail for several years now.

» Each stamp does a fantastic job of capturing the fun of each game.



» There's nothing second class about *Elite*, unless it's in stamp form.

» Considering the popularity of *Tomb Raider*, it's no surprise to find the franchise has four stamps available.

Mail. Summing up nearly 40 years of British videogames in eight stamps was always going to be tricky." It was a tricky task, and while we're somewhat surprised to see nothing from Ultimate/Rare or Matt Smith, there's no denying they represent a solid window into the British games market. Interestingly, the Oliver twins agree, feeling that the likes of *Knight Lore*, *Ant Attack* or a Jeff Minter game would have all been "very deserving". Philip even suggested there might have been the opportunity for a second set. "For us, we think that the PlayStation era was a different time and should have been celebrated with another set of stamps," he concludes.

One of the things we love about the stamps is how great each game looks. "I think that is where I was able to really add to the project," continues Sam. "I know all the games well and know what images are 'iconic' from them. The exact screen was down to us to decide. Some images had to be manipulated to work in the space, such as *Elite* where we had to move the odd planet here and there to get it looking perfect. *Sensible Soccer* was the most fun for me as it's actually a recreation of Geoff Hurst's second goal in the World Cup final on 1966. No one would ever notice but I was just having fun."

Sam may have been having fun, but it shouldn't take away from the difficulty of creating stamps in the first place. "Supple Studio are really the experts here and brought all their experience to the table," concludes Sam. "Designing a stamp is a real art and often what looks good in your head, looks terrible on a stamp. It's such a small area that you'd think it would be easy to work with, but it's very tricky. I think that main design choice was really spending time to get the perfect screenshot. The t-rex scene from *Tomb Raider* must have been played through literally hundreds of times to get just the right timing. Sorry, Gonçalo!"

» Royal Mail's new stamp set is a wonderful snapshot of UK videogame history.

MORE DEVELOPER PRAISE

Andy Davidson, Worms

"It's hard to put into words! It really has made my day, to be amongst games I loved and consider classics, such as *Elite*. To go from a game I wrote for me and my mates to it being on a Royal Mail stamp is something I never dreamed of happening. I'm so happy that people enjoyed *Worms*, and that it was felt worthy to be a part of this collection. I'm very proud of it indeed."

Andrew Graham, Micro Machines

"I was immensely proud to see *Micro Machines* immortalised in stamp form, and it isn't something I ever imagined when developing the game all those years ago. It's great to see it being recognised alongside the likes of *Dizzy*, *Sensible Soccer* and others. We tried to keep the emphasis on fun, with the responsive handling, and the miniature environments, and this is something I still aim for with the games I create to this day!"

FATHER OF THE PERSONAL COMPUTER REMEMBERED

CHUCK PEDDLE, DESIGNER OF THE 6502 CHIP, HAS PASSED AWAY, AGED 82

Without the skill and determination of Chuck Peddle – the engineer who designed the ultra-low-cost 6502 microprocessor – who knows where computing would be today. After all, his $25 chip helped bring computers to the masses, powering a host of iconic products made by Apple, Acorn and Commodore among others, making him something of an unsung hero.

> **"He helped enable an industry of software developers and [made] software products affordable"**
> Daniel Fylstra

The plan was to take an expensive processor board and boil it down into an affordable integrated circuit. And yet it very nearly didn't happen. When Chuck's employer, Motorola, listened to the proposal in 1974, it was promptly rejected amid fears that it would rival the company's $300 6800 processor.

Undeterred, Chuck and seven other Motorola engineers took the development to rival company MOS Technology, leading to the 6501, a lawsuit by Motorola and the iconic 1MHz 6502. It is for this that Chuck will be forever remembered. Born on 25 November 1937, he sadly passed away on 15 December last year having lost his battle with pancreatic cancer. He was aged 82.

"Chuck Peddle's 6502 came to dominate the 8-bit home micro market mainly because of its low price point," recalls British computer scientist Steve Furber who led the final design and production of the BBC Micro.

"Acorn had used the 6502 processor in the System 1 and Atom computers [prior to the Micro] and it had good real-time performance. Our experience of the chip fed directly into our production of the ARM processor because we had been dissatisfied with the early 16-bit processor offerings. I think it is fair to say that the ARM owes a lot to the 6502."

The Atari 2600, Atari 8-bit family, Commodore 64 and Apple II were among other computers to incorporate the MOS Technology 6502 and variants at their heart and the chip sold for roughly 15% of the price of rival processors from Motorola and Intel. It would also go head-to-head with the Zilog Z80 in offering high-performance computing at an affordable price. Chuck's plan had proven revolutionary.

When MOS was acquired by Commodore in 1976, Chuck stayed with the company. He had just finished working on the 6502-based KIM-1 single-board computer and he used this to convince Commodore's boss Jack Tramiel that the microcomputer market offered great riches. Chuck then went on to design the Commodore PET which became the company's first mass-market computer.

"By designing the MOS Technologies 6502 microprocessor and creating the Commodore PET microcomputer, Chuck Peddle did much more than build a successful product – he helped enable a whole industry of software developers and [made] software products affordable and usable by ordinary people, not just large companies," Daniel Fylstra tells us, having received one of the first PETs when he was *Byte* magazine's new products editor in 1977.

A falling out with Jack Tramiel prompted Chuck to turn entrepreneur. He cofounded Sirius Systems Technology with former Commodore Business Machines financier Chris Fish in 1980 and acquired Victor Business Systems two years later. Chuck developed and released the innovative computer, the Victor 9000 (or ACT Sirius 1 as it was known in the UK). Based on the Intel 8080 processor, it competed against IBM's PC and boasted a 12-inch monochrome monitor, two 5.25-inch disk drives and 128K RAM.

Later in his career, Chuck created the company NNA Corporation and he worked for Tandon Corporation in the late Eighties, developing a portable hard drive. He also worked on repairing memory chips for reuse. But his role as the father of the personal computer is what he'll be remembered for most and, given its impact, quite rightly so. ✱

Credit: Jason Scott, CC BY 2.0

» Chuck Peddle began his career at General Electric but made his mark at MOS Technologies.

User's Report: The PET 2001

» Dan Fylstra reviewed Chuck Peddle's Commodore PET 2001, having received the 17th unit off the production line.

» Steve Furber, designer of the BBC Micro, says the low price point of the 6502 was a real strength.

Credit: Rama, CC BY-SA 2.0

» Having persuaded Commodore to move from calculators to computers, Chuck designed the PET.

» The Atari 2600 used a near-identical version of the 6502 called the 6507 that used fewer pins.

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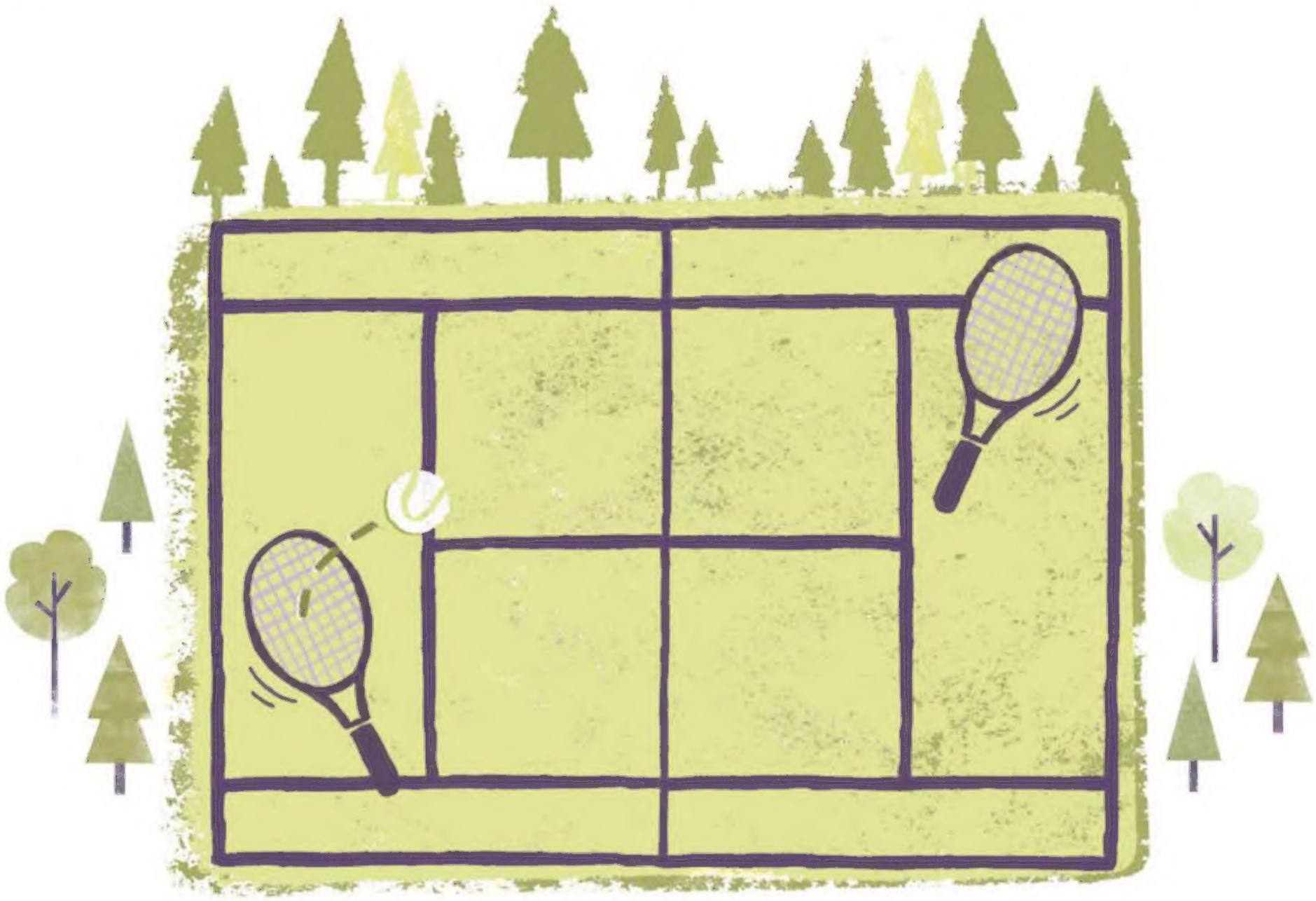

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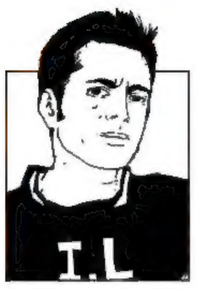
TWO SIDES

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. He currently hosts *The Late Night Alternative* show at weekdays from 10pm on www.talkradio.co.uk and runs daily retro streams on www.twitch.tv/iainlee.

Chasing ghosts



Every now and then someone will tell me I should make a TV show about games. While it's kind of people to think of me in that way, that's not how telly works. You can't just phone up the BBC and tell them that you want to make a show.

I've been involved in two videogames shows in my life. One I am really proud of. The other was a bit of a disappointment for me as it wasn't exactly what was promised when I signed up for it.

Let's talk about the good one. *Thumb Candy* was a delightful stroll through the history of videogames up to 2000. I met some amazing people. I played *Pong* in Al Alcorn's garage on his original machine. Went to the home of Eugene Jarvis and played *Defender*, even though he had come out in hives. I even flew to Japan to hang out with Shigeru Miyamoto and be taught how to cheat at *Space Invaders* by its creator, Tomohiro Nishikado (who almost cried when I beat him).

The weirdest interview was conducted in a Namco arcade with Toru Iwatani, the genius behind *Pac-Man*. We had to sit through a *lot* of meetings with the suits at Namco, carefully explaining what we wanted to do and how respectful we would be. Oh, something I learned in that meeting: if a Japanese person hands you a business card, DO NOT PUT IT STRAIGHT IN YOUR WALLET. You might as well be spitting on their mother's grave. No, take the card, look at it, turn it over and study the back, then look at the front again for significantly longer than feels comfortable. Only then may you slowly put it in your wallet, thanking them profusely.

Iwatani was a lovely, slightly bumbling gentleman. When we eventually did meet him, he was flanked by around 15 people. At least four were translators. I have no idea who the others were. He was very nervous and incredibly sweaty. It felt like he was being held prisoner by the company and forced to trot out the same, slightly unbelievable, story about him getting the idea for the character of Puckman (as he was originally called) from eating pizza. I just don't buy it, and I felt that he wanted to tell me the truth. But he did as he was told. After chatting, he played *Pac-Man* for me. He wasn't great, but for me it was like watching John Lennon try and remember the chords for *Strawberry Fields Forever* and getting them slightly wrong. It didn't matter. It was just a beautiful moment that I was thrilled to be a part of.

Hmm. I was going to spend my 500 words banging on about the other show I worked on, *Thumb Bandits*, and how it didn't turn out the way I wanted. We may have to leave that for another time. I have the sudden urge to go and chase Clyde and co. Maybe I'll tell you next month. *

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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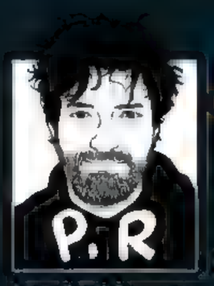
Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

I'm sticking with you



The best and worst thing about growing up is having a disposable income. I mean, a limited disposable income. I'm not loaded by any means, but (at least to a degree) I'm able to spend some of my money on things that I would like to own.

Since stumbling accidentally into games journalism I've owned most of the major formats – either by blagging review machines, or by forking out for them with my hard-earned cash. In the past 20 or so years, I don't think there has been a major game release I haven't been able to play. And now that we live in this age of retro gaming, where the past is available on tap, I can even experience the games I never got to play first time around.

It does concern me, though, that having this sort of blanket access to everything might just, a little bit, devalue its worth. Back in the Eighties, I had to make do with whatever games machines I'd be fortunate enough to get for Christmas, and whatever games I'd be able to save up my pocket money for.

I went from the family Atari VCS, to a ZX Spectrum, to an Atari ST, to a Master System – the first hardware I bought using my own money [me too - Ed]. Like most of us, I never got to own any of the other big machines of the time, which – much as I loved the ones I owned – I nonetheless coveted. No Intellivision, no Commodore 64 or BBC Micro. No Amiga. No Atari Lynx. No NES.

Don't get me wrong; I wasn't spoiled… well, maybe a bit. But I knew my parents weren't wealthy, and so the systems I owned in my formative years were a big deal. At the time I never felt like I wasn't missing out by owning every machine and every game. In fact, it made me value the ones I did own far more.

Even the most terrible games, footnotes almost in the history of gaming, I would play to death, because I wouldn't know when I'd be able to afford another. *Bugaboo The Flea* – hardly a classic – is a good example. I'd picked it up at a Wembley market, and playing it over and over and over is one of my fondest childhood memories. Even if I never did quite manage to get that damn flea out of that cave.

God, it was an annoying game – fundamentally flawed, far too unfair, and ugly to look at – and yet I have an attachment to it that I don't think I've ever developed for a game released in the past decade. Not knowing when I'd get the chance to own another new game, I was kind of forced to stick with it. And because I stuck with it, I developed a relationship with it. It was an island that I explored every inch of, whereas today I live on an archipelago and own a speed boat; I can flit from island to island at will. None of the islands are special to me in the same way as that one I lived on for months.

That's a metaphor, by the way. I don't literally live on an archipelago of islands with a speedboat.

> "Not knowing when I'd get the chance to own another new game, I was kind of forced to stick with it"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

Sonics for Sonic

We catch up with Sonic Team's sound director, Jun Senoue

For over 25 years, Jun Senoue has been shaping the sounds of Sega games, most famously including the *Sonic* series. Along with Sonic Adventure Music Experience bandmates Takeshi Taneda and Act, he recently performed for hundreds of fans packed into The Garage in London, playing classic themes from Sonic's Dreamcast era and new tracks from *Team Sonic Racing*.

You've previously performed at the UK Summer Of Sonic events, but Sonic Adventure Music Experience was just about the music. How did this event come to happen?

I started Sonic Adventure Music Experience in 2016 to celebrate *Sonic*'s 25th anniversary as a trio band with Takeshi Taneda and Act. We have performed a couple of shows in Japan and a headliner show at MAGFest, but this is the very first time that we brought this full-band experience to the UK.

Adam Tuff, one of the organisers of the Summer Of Sonic, came to our very first Tokyo show in 2016 and he and his team wanted to bring us over to the UK. It was the perfect timing to have a show here because we recently released *Team Sonic Racing*, and 2019 was the 20th anniversary of Dreamcast and *Sonic Adventure*. I think the audience enjoyed the spontaneous full-band experience and our groove. We were very surprised that the audience in London sang along with all our instrumental songs so loudly. It really made us smile!

» The Sonic Adventure Music Experience, live in London. Left to right: Jun Senoue, Act, Takeshi Taneda

[NES] Senoue doesn't just work on *Sonic* games – he recently arranged a *Mega Man 4* medley for *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*

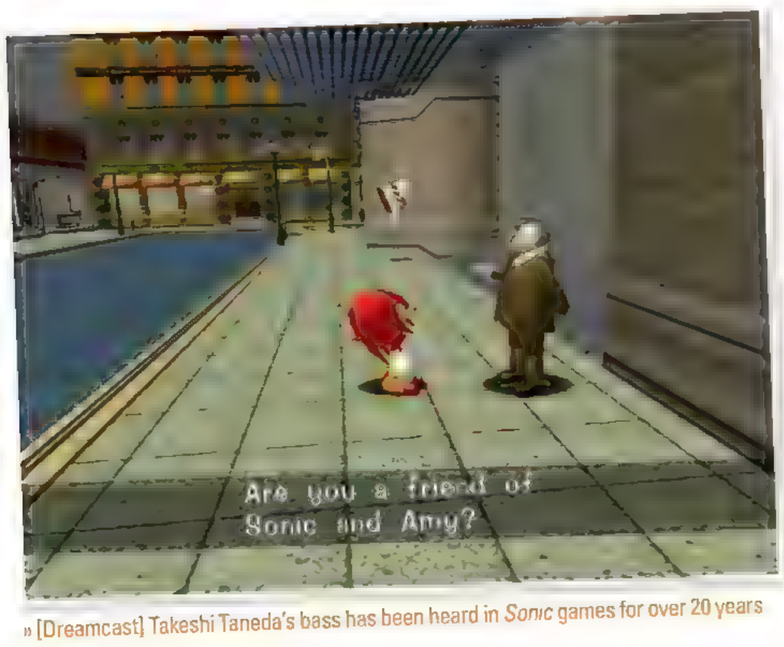
Please tell us a little bit about the other members of the band, Takeshi Taneda and Act – will fans have heard their work in *Sonic* games, too?

Takeshi Taneda is a bass monster. We are the same age, born in August 1970. I first met him in the mid-Nineties and we've worked together ever since. He is always recording and touring and doing many projects, so it's pretty hard to book him. Do you remember the slap bass on the song for Station Square? Or how about the wild slap bass intro of the City Escape song? All those memorable bass sounds were recorded by him.

Act is a young drummer from a different generation. He grew up listening to the *Sonic The Hedgehog* songs I wrote, so he knows the songs very well. He is talented and has some fresh ideas to bring to the group. The three of us recorded lots of songs as a core band when we worked on *Team Sonic Racing*. This was also Act's first work on a *Sonic* game.

What are your favourite memories of working on the *Sonic Adventure* games?

Sonic Adventure was the biggest production for me at that time. I had many songs to wrap up, and it was my first time working with a large number of voice scripts. That project was tough but also a lot of fun. Also, having several vocal songs was a challenge for the team but it was worth a try. Every single song was the perfect match for the character theme and their attitude/characteristics. Furthermore, *Open Your Heart* was the very first song where I teamed up with Johnny Gioeli.



» [Dreamcast] Takeshi Taneda's bass has been heard in *Sonic* games for over 20 years

We moved to San Francisco when we worked on *Sonic Adventure 2*. I got a lot of inspiration from my life in California, and I got approval from the director (Takashi Iizuka) to make a song with vocals for the first level, City Escape. Both *Escape From The City* and *Live & Learn* (the game's main theme, by Crush 40) are still popular songs for this franchise.

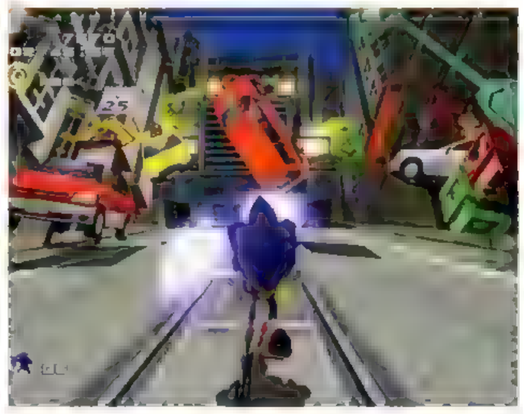
You often perform *Sonic* music live, and brought back Sand Hill and Final Egg's themes for *Team Sonic Racing*. Why is this game one you revisit so often?

For *Team Sonic Racing* there were several tracks based on the levels from the previous *Sonic* games and some of them just couldn't be left out. I thought implementing that kind of music would be a nice surprise for Sonic fans, plus it would fit nicely in the racing game genre with an aggressive arrangement. We worked on those games two decades ago and it was so much fun to revisit them. I am glad that everyone enjoyed the results!

I personally would love to revisit other games like *Sonic And The Black Knight* or *Shadow The Hedgehog* if our fans would like to hear it.

When you're updating past compositions, how do you approach the task – what's the right balance between retaining the familiar sound and adding new elements?

It was *Angel Island Zone* for *Super Smash Bros Brawl* when I started arranging *Sonic* music. I received positive feedback on it and that was a good reference for my later arrangements. I don't want to change the melody or structure of the song much, since I want to respect the original. Adding vibe, emotion, passion, and energy when we record the music.



» [Dreamcast] When the band played *Escape From The City* as an encore, the whole crowd was singing

Are there any of your non-*Sonic* soundtracks that you'd particularly like to perform live?

I sometimes record the guitars for *Phantasy Star Online 2* songs. These are very technical songs and hard to play, but a worthy challenge. I have only performed them once, but it would be great to do it more.

Crush 40, another project I am working on, includes lots of non-*Sonic*-related songs and they are really fun to perform live. I want to bring Crush 40 back to the UK as a full-band performance, sometime in the near future. Please check out our latest release, *Driving Through Forever*!

Finally, there are still lots of *Sonic*-related vocal songs that we have not performed live yet. It would be a dream to perform some of these songs in front of our loyal fans. I know our fans would want to sing along with us!

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

MARCH 2003 – With bad news for arcades, underwhelming sequels to classic games and brand-new games that failed to match the hype, this isn't a month to remember... but Nick Thorpe will revisit it for your pleasure

NEWS MARCH 2003

The EU was set to grow by a further two members, as Malta and Slovenia both approved membership in March. The referendum in Malta took place on 8 March, attracting a 91% turnout with 53.7% of voters indicating their approval for membership. 60% of voters took part in Slovenia's poll on 23 March, with 89.6% of those voters opting to join the EU. Slovenia's referendum also asked about NATO membership, which gained the support of 66% of voters.

Serbian president Zoran Djindjic was assassinated by a sniper in Belgrade on 12 March. The murder was plotted by organised crime boss Dusan Spasojevic and Milorad Ulemek, who had served in former president Slobodan Milosevic's elite special forces. Ex-special forces member Zvezdan Jovanovic acted as the gunman, and claimed to have killed Djindjic for being a traitor to Serbia.

On March 19, a coalition led by the USA commenced the invasion of Iraq, on the disputed premise that the nation was an active sponsor of international terrorism, and possessed weapons of mass destruction. The United States Air Force started with a bombing raid of observation posts on the opening day of hostilities, before ground troops from the USA, UK, Australia and Poland invaded Iraq the next day.

[PS2] The big project from Studio Cambridge was weaker than expected due to its rigidity

THE LATEST NEWS FROM MARCH 2003

The arcade business hadn't been in a good state for a while, and the news coming out of trade shows did nothing to dispel that particular notion. *Edge*'s brief report on the ATEI show claimed that it "did little to stem the impression given in recent years that the coin-op sector is heading towards moribundity", with the "few surprises on offer" reflecting the level of activity amongst developers – with "barely a trickle of titles being developed". Namco's drumming game *Taiko No Tatsujin*, Konami's lightgun shooter *Warzaid* and Gaelco's driving game *Tokyo Cop: Special Police Reinforcement* were singled out as highlights, though *Edge* noted that "perhaps the most notable development was the introduction of cash prizes to standard coin-op titles" such as *Silent Scope Fortune Hunter* and *Club Kart Prize*. There was even worse news in *games™*, as early reports from the AOU show in Japan suggested that "*Capcom Fighting All-Stars* may be the company's final foray into the cabinet market, and rumour has it that even that may not get made". If true, that would mark the end of an arcade legacy that gave us *Commando*, *1942*, *Final Fight*, *Street Fighter II* and many more classics.

That wasn't the only disappointment from Capcom this month, as *Devil May Cry 2* arrived on the PS2 to a subdued reception. The hack-and-slash sequel earned 6/10 in *games™*, which lamented that although the game "can't really be called a 'bad' game", the new moves and weapons failed to excite the reviewer, especially as they failed to compensate for the removal of "virtually all of the puzzles in the game". *Play* had many of the same criticisms but was a little easier on the game, giving it an 82% score and additionally pointing out graphical issues including "repetitive textures and ugly clashing colours" and "shimmering caused by a lack of filtering on the textures". Also underwhelming was Sony's action adventure *Primal*, which scored 69% in *Play* and 4/10 in *Edge*, with the latter criticising it for being "so prescriptive and hand-holding

[Arcade] *Capcom Fighting All-Stars* never did get released, and Capcom did in fact withdraw from the arcade market

[PS2] *Devil May Cry 2* is the least loved of the series, with only Ninja Theory's 2013 reboot as a rival

[PC] After all the hype, *Unreal II* failed to live up to anyone's critical or commercial expectations

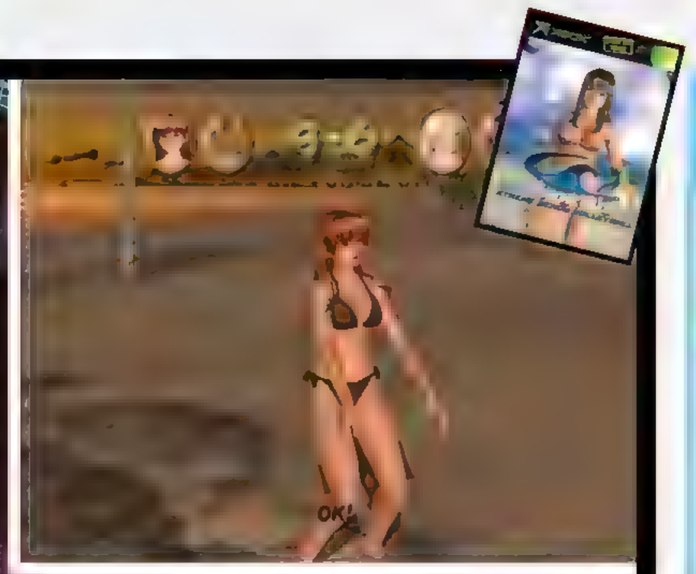
that it could almost be called on-rails". Sony's other release, *The Mark Of Kri*, fared better. *Edge* gave it 7/10 and *Play* described it as "a stylish slasher with enough bells and whistles to save it from mediocrity", scoring it 78%.

Dead Or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball was the big release of the month on the Xbox, and it divided opinion, receiving 8/10 from *Edge* and 6/10 from *games™*. The former argued that the game "bears more comparison to a title such as *Animal Crossing*, rather than a title like *Beach Spikers*" due to its inclusion of substantial non-sporting elements, and felt that, "Tecmo has succeeded in evoking a supremely relaxing vacation atmosphere." By comparison, *games™* felt that the prominence given to shopping, gambling and other activities meant that it was "not the game that some were expecting" and that the lack of a four-player option was the game's biggest shortcoming.

The UK releases of *Resident Evil 0* (85% *NGC*, 9/10 *Cube*) and *Super Monkey Ball 2* (82% *NGC*, 9.1/10 *Cube*) provided plenty for GameCube owners to be getting on with, but if those games failed to appeal, *Phantasy Star Online Episode I & II* might have been more up your street. The action RPG was the first online game to make it to Nintendo's console, and earned 90% from *NGC* for being "a beautifully realised version of *Gauntlet*" with a "unique sense of community". *Cube*'s lower score of 7.5/10 reflected the need for monthly subscription payments and a "terribly dull" offline experience that was "impossible to recommend". Elsewhere, the arrival of *Micro Machines* on the GameCube failed to generate much excitement, earning 5.2/10 from *Cube* and 57% from *NGC*, which condemned it as "never surprising and, more crucially, never really very exciting".

Disappointing sequels defined the month in PC gaming. *IGI2: Covert Strike* was given 5/10 by *Edge*, which criticised the game for relying heavily on trial-and-error gameplay and offering "little to stand out from the glut of stealth-based titles available on any platform". *Unreal II: The Awakening* earned 6/10 in *games™*, which criticised it for a short, dull campaign, high system requirements and a lack of multiplayer. "The final two levels suddenly cause the game to spring to life," noted the reviewer. "Maybe if more time had been spent on making the others less routine as well, you might not have noticed how quickly the game was over." Game Boy Advance owners could get their hands on *Shining Soul*, an action RPG remake of the Mega Drive classic *Shining Force*, but *NGC*'s 67% review indicated problems – most notably that menu actions took place in real time, allowing monsters to beat you up. Instead, handheld players might have been better off importing *Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting*, a wonderful boxing game from Treasure that scored 8/10 in *Edge*.

Well, that was a gloomy month, wasn't it? Do join us again next time regardless, as we're sure to have exciting things in store.



[Xbox] A screenshot of a game that "doesn't rely on titillation to sustain cheap thrills", apparently

[GameCube] Perhaps sensing Nintendo's reluctance to embrace online gaming, Sega allowed for offline multiplayer in *Phantasy Star Online*

CHARTS

MARCH 2003

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – Tenchu: Wrath Of Heaven (Activision)
2 – The Getaway (Sony)
3 – Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Take 2)
4 – The Sims (EA)
5 – Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance (Midway)

XBOX

1 – Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance (Konami)
2 – The Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers (EA)
3 – The House Of The Dead III (Infogrames)
4 – Project Gotham Racing (Microsoft)
5 – Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell (Ubisoft)

GAMECUBE

1 – Super Monkey Ball 2 (Infogrames)
2 – Resident Evil Zero (Capcom)
3 – Sonic Mega Collection (Infogrames)
4 – Super Mario Sunshine (Nintendo)
5 – The Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers (EA)

MUSIC

1 – Spirit In The Sky (Gareth Gates ft The Kumars)
2 – All I Have (Jennifer Lopez ft LL Cool J)
3 – Born To Try (Delta Goodrem)
4 – In Da Club (50 Cent)
5 – Beautiful (Christina Aguilera)

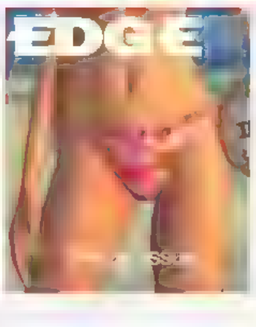
THIS MONTH IN...

games™

Well, who's that fresh-faced young scamp in the contributors list for this issue? It's one Darran Jones, making his debut. Whatever happened to him, eh? Darran officially joined as news editor, which seems like a weird job after over 15 years of focus on retro games. Congrats, boss: your magazine debut is now officially retro!

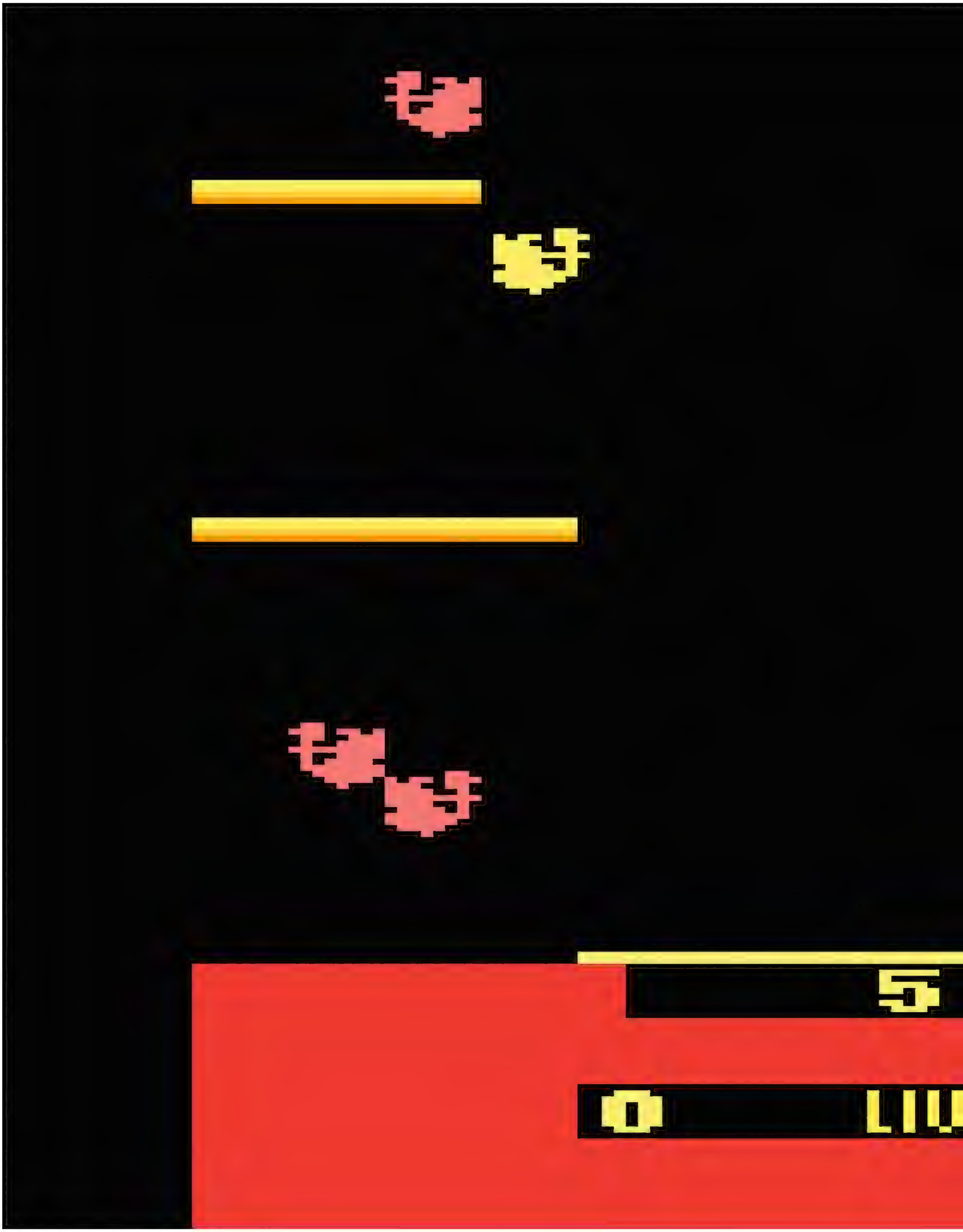
Play

To celebrate its 100th issue, *Play* issued its list of the top 100 PlayStation and PS2 games. *GTA: Vice City* hit the top spot, capping off a top ten that included *Metal Gear Solid*, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Pro Evolution Soccer*, *Gran Turismo*, *TimeSplitters*, *Ico*, *Ridge Racer*, *Resident Evil* and *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*. Pretty solid!



Edge

"What do you think needs to change if videogames are to become socially acceptable for women by other women?" asks *Edge*. "I don't think it's other girls that make them socially unacceptable. None of my female friends has ever had a problem with my playing games," says Violet Berlin, indirectly highlighting the absurdity of the question.



Joust

WINNER, WINNER, CHICKEN DINNER

» ATARI 2600 » 1983 » ATARI

I was pretty lucky as a kid, as my parents never really had a problem with videogames. I've got fond childhood memories of playing Mega Drive and PlayStation games with my dad, and while my mum was never really much of a gamer, she did pay attention to my hobby and was always willing to help me enjoy it. But we didn't really have a lot back then, so this often meant scouring Future Zone for mispriced Master System games, or grabbing loose Atari 2600 cartridges from the market – at £1, they were definitely affordable. I'd get to choose the game if I was with her, but occasionally she'd bring back a game as a surprise, and mum had a surprising knack for picking up good ones.

One such surprise was *Joust*. I've no idea quite why it was chosen, but I do remember having great fun with it. I had no familiarity with the arcade game as it's a few years older than I am, and there were no instructions, so a lot of the early fun was just trying to work out what I was supposed to do. Figuring out that I could fly about was pretty easy, but it took a while to learn that winning a clash depended on your height, rather than speed. Once I had that down, the game quickly became one of my favourites on the system.

Of course mum was interested to see what the game she'd bought was like, and she was pleased to see that I was having so much fun with it – so much so that she still remembers it fondly today. The only problem is that my mum can recall sights and sounds far better than she can remember names, and thanks to the relative lack of detail in the sprites, she always saw them as chickens. As a result, I'd get a blank look if I said, "Hey mum, do you remember *Joust*?" But if I bring up the 'chicken game', we could easily spend an hour talking about it. She's an odd duck (by which I mean chicken). ✱

PC Engine mini

THE LEGEND RETURNS

IN THE KNOW

RELEASE DATE 19 March 2020
PRICE £99.99
RETAILER Available exclusively through www.amazon.co.uk
ACCESSORIES
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FOR MANY YEARS, THE PC ENGINE HAS BEEN THE BEST CONSOLE NEVER TO GET AN OFFICIAL UK RELEASE, BUT KONAMI IS FINALLY BRINGING IT HERE, COMPLETE WITH DOZENS OF GAMES. WE'VE TRIED IT – AND HERE'S WHY WE THINK YOU SHOULD BE EXCITED ABOUT IT

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

The PC Engine Mini is by far the most fascinating of the recent wave of plug-and-play retro systems. Now, we'd imagine that some of you are probably thinking, "Blimey, that's a bold opening statement," after having read that, but it's true for one simple reason – Konami has chosen to sell the PC Engine Mini in Europe. Although the console was popular with UK importers thanks to coverage in *Mean Machines* and achieved popularity in France via the Guillemot subsidiary Sodipeng, it never actually had a proper official release in the territory, and won't benefit from the nostalgia that has driven sales of the SNES, Mega Drive and C64 minis. But we don't think that's a disadvantage – in fact, we think it's an opportunity.

You see, the PC Engine has always been a relatively difficult system to get into. Its import-only nature means that it rarely turns up in the wild for impulse purchasing, and the various combinations of different models and add-ons can be intimidating to an inexperienced collector. There has never been a PC Engine compilation on modern consoles, and even the pretty decent Virtual Console line-ups missed things like the SuperGrafx and Arcade CD-ROM games. Though many gamers will have been aware of the PC Engine thanks to import coverage in magazines like *C&VG*, these factors have ensured that the console has remained accessible only to the more adventurous retro gamer. So, yes, the PC Engine Mini represents an opportunity. For the first time there is a convenient and affordable way to get an introduction to this console, arguably the greatest never to be released in this region, complete with a curated selection of games. Plenty of our readers should be interested in this. If you remember those screenshots in the magazines of the late Eighties but never got a chance to try the games, you should be interested. If you already know and like the PC Engine but don't fancy paying through the nose for a copy of *Sapphire*, you should be interested. If you don't know anything about the PC Engine but love games from the era when 2D was king and want to find new favourites, you should be interested.

To find out more about the console, we visited Konami to try out the European version of the machine, the PC Engine CoreGrafx Mini. We also spoke to Richard Jones, senior brand manager at Konami, who explained why the company decided to create the machine. "We first considered bringing the PC Engine back in 2018. The west had limited access to the console before this, but we knew that many of our fans were passionate about seeing it make a comeback. Our fans are our top priority, and we wanted to give them something they had been asking for as well as give a new generation the opportunity to experience the console and its classic games for the first time." But how does Konami see the appeal for players who might not hold any nostalgia for the system? "PC Engine Mini has a huge collection of brilliant games to revisit, plus weird and wonderful games that many will have never played before (looking at you, *Appare! Gateball*). It's a unique time capsule of a point in console history that Europe largely missed and a great introduction to a little console that broke ground in many ways," says Richard, explaining the appeal. "For me personally, the chance to play *Castlevania* (*Akumajou Dracula X: Chi No Rondo*) on a PC Engine controller brings an unbeatable level of authenticity to the experience that I would encourage everyone to try. Plus, Bonk climbs walls with his teeth – amazing."

We were curious as to how Konami has handled the hardware side of things, given that the company isn't traditionally thought of as a hardware business. "Konami has a long history of innovating in hardware development, however, as you say, this was new ground for Konami Digital Entertainment," says Richard, reminding us of the company's history in both peripheral development and the arcade business. "For PC Engine Mini, we partnered with the well-known hardware manufacturer, Hori to utilise their expertise in the field. They handled all development and production of the hardware elements with close involvement from our teams in Japan." Japanese players will get the original style white PC Engine and North American audiences get a miniaturised TurboGrafx-16, but Europe didn't have an obvious hardware model to use. Because this represents the first proper European release of a PC Engine product, with the aborted PAL TurboGrafx launch being officially unacknowledged, there's no historical model to draw from. As a result, we get a system modelled after the CoreGrafx model. "By utilising the PC Engine CoreGrafx design for Europe, we thought it would be a great opportunity to highlight some of the various hardware iterations in its history. Our hope is to provide this community with something unique, something that we were not able to provide in 1987," Richard explains.

HIROMASA IWASAKI

A VETERAN PC ENGINE DEVELOPER OFFERS A JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE ON THE PC ENGINE AND ITS MINI COUNTERPART

You worked on two games that are included on PC Engine Mini: *Ys Book I & II* and *Tengai Makyouu II*. How do you feel about them being on the console?

I'm very happy that three of my favourite games, *Tengai Makyouu II*, *Ys Book I & II* and *Ys I & II* (Japan) are on sale again. *Ys Book I & II* is the only game for which I won a Game Of The Year award in 1990, so I am very proud of it.

Ys Book I & II has a very different balance between the Japanese and English versions. I changed everything, but the story and gameplay are exactly the same, so I want you to play it in Japanese and see the difference.

The PC Engine was the first console to use CD-ROM, so you were using very new technology. How much did you enjoy working with this console? What was good or bad about it?

I enjoyed it, but the amount of RAM (64KB plus 64KB) was really low. Every day, code no longer fit in RAM and we shrank the code. Buddy [Hirosbi] Hasegawa said, *Ys* is almost always out of memory.

I used to build the CD-i development environment from 1985 to 1987 before using PC Engine CD-ROM. So I knew the strength and weakness of the CD at the time. The strength is disposable capacity and CD sound (ADPCM sound quality was very low at the beginning, so I didn't want to use that). Weakness is access and loading time. At that time, users were accustomed to the speed of ROM directly connected to the computer (which is different nowadays), that meant everything ran instantaneously. So users had never seen loading times. Also, since the CD is a CLV (constant linear velocity), I knew that seeking time was slow in principle.

If we compress data and avoid loading as long as possible, we can use CD audio for background music and since there is no loading, users do not feel it's slow. So I had three policies at that time: use CD Audio and voice when the player boots the game; show animation when the player boots the game; do not load for as long as we possibly can. Because without loading, nobody thinks it's slow (laughs).

PC Engine software came in many different formats – HuCard, CD-ROM, Super CD-ROM, etc. Other than the amount of storage space (or memory for CD/Super CD), was there much difference in developing games of different types?

Yes and no. The difference between CD-ROM and HuCard was very large. On CD-ROM and Super CD-ROM difference was just amount of RAM. So programs didn't have many differences. Some games do have mini games for the "This is a Super CD-ROM game" warning screen.

The PC Engine was never officially released in the UK, so many people don't know much about it. What do gamers in Japan think about the PC Engine today?

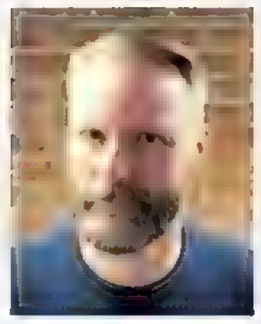
In Japan, PC Engine was the second best-selling game machine on the market at the time. Many people remember PC Engine as the first CD-ROM game machine in history.

Some games on the PC Engine Mini are the English TurboGrafx versions, like *Bonk's Revenge* and *Lords Of Thunder*, even in Japan. How do you feel about this?

Most games don't require good English reading skill, so I'm just looking forward to those games that I have never seen in English. In other words, I don't care and I am looking forward to these games.

Apart from your own games, which games featured on the PC Engine Mini are your personal favourites?

Tokimeki Memorial and *Blazing Lazers*. Actually, I worked on part of the balancing for *Blazing Lazers* at that time.



"WITHOUT INCLUDING BOTH PC ENGINE AND TURBOGRAFX-16 TITLES, WE DIDN'T FEEL THAT WE WERE MAKING PC ENGINE MINI TRULY ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL USERS"
RICHARD JONES

While some might lament the choice of style, the physical product is pleasing. Like other mini consoles, the PC Engine CoreGrafx Mini is a faithful replica of the original machine – though since the PC Engine was already small, the Mini isn't a huge size reduction and is ironically a bit bigger than the other mini consoles out there. There are a couple of notable changes – power and HDMI connections are on the back of the machine instead of the sides, and two USB controller ports are present instead of the single port of the original. One controller is included in the package, and it is an authentic pad with turbo fire switches for each of the buttons, just like those packaged with the original CoreGrafx. Extra controllers are available separately and if you want to play with more than two players in games like *Bomberman 94* or *Dungeon Explorer*, up to five players are supported via the multitap, which is also sold separately.

The software side has been handled by M2, which also developed the software for Sega's well-received Mega Drive Mini. "M2 has a great reputation and history of developing authentic emulation experiences for some of gaming's most beloved titles. Konami has worked extensively with M2 in the past and so from the beginning it was clear that M2 would be able to handle the challenge of bringing PC Engine and its greatest titles to a modern audience," says Richard. "We are thrilled with the attention to detail shown in the UI design, including creative touches that add an extra layer of charm to the console." The menu is indeed functional and fun, with some neat little touches that we've detailed elsewhere. Display options are 4:3, pixel perfect, stretched 16:9 widescreen, each with an optional CRT filter and a selection of wallpapers. The fourth option is really just there for fun, as it's a PC Engine GT/TurboExpress mode complete with a filter for that authentic dodgy old LCD appearance. Our initial impressions of the emulation are good, as all the games we played both looked and sounded authentic.

Emulation is nothing without games though, and Konami's game selection process was designed to highlight the PC Engine's unique appeal. "With such a rich library of games, many of which are relatively unknown to Western audiences, the decision was a difficult one," says Richard. "We started by considering all PC Engine titles as candidates but wanted to ensure that we struck a fair balance between games that are now well-known while offering a chance for gamers to discover unique titles that only appeared on this system. In doing so, we hope to please fans new and old with our selection." That may sound pretty standard, but Konami's console differs from the other retro mini consoles on the market due to its global approach to game inclusion – no matter which model you buy, you'll get both Japanese and North American games. "PC Engine has a notable history in Japan and North America, where it was known as TurboGrafx-16. Without including both PC Engine and TurboGrafx-16 titles, we didn't feel that we were making PC Engine mini truly accessible for all users," explains Richard. "Particularly with the text-heavy Japanese RPGs such as *Ys Book I & II*, *Dungeon Explorer* and *Neutopia*, they would have been impenetrable without the TG-16 versions. Unfortunately, this wasn't possible for all titles – *Snatcher* and *Akumajou Dracula X: Chi No Rondo* [*Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood*], for example, never saw release on TG-16."

Though this approach isn't common, we feel that it's one that works well for the PC Engine. We contacted the owner of the PC Engine Software Bible (www.pcengine.co.uk), Paul Weller, for a second opinion and he came to a similar same conclusion. "For us in the UK at least, most of our PC Engine collections started with Japanese games. I personally only purchased US localised CD games when they were RPGs or the Japanese versions were unavailable/expensive," says Paul. "Many users in the US were denied some fantastic games on the TurboGrafx-16, so this will allow them to get a glimpse of what they were missing, from crazy titles like *Cho Aniki* to fun action games like *The Legend*

TINKERING WITH THE ENGINE

HERE'S A LITTLE LOOK AT THE PC ENGINE MINI'S MENU, TO SHOW OFF WHAT IT CAN DO

1 The main menu is themed based on the region of games you're looking at – CoreGrafx for Japan or TurboGrafx for North America. You can change Japan's theme to PC Engine in the menu, if you like.

2 When you start a game, the HuCard pops into this slot here. If you start a CD-ROM game, the appropriate system card goes in instead, complete with an authentic CD drive whirring sound.

3 The title of the game is displayed in this bar, with Japanese titles romanised for your convenience. On the left, the flash replicates the original game's spine, usually indicating the game's format.

4 Cover art for each game is displayed nice and big, right in the centre of the screen. If you're looking for a game quickly, the row of thumbnails above the full-sized art should help you find it.

5 PC Engine-kun, the little mascot for the console, walks around in the background of the menu screen. You can turn this feature off if you want, but we'll consider you a joyless monster if you do.

6 Somewhat oddly, you can only view a single region's games at any time – you can't look at them as a whole. To change from PC Engine to TurboGrafx or vice versa, simply hit this button in the bottom-right.

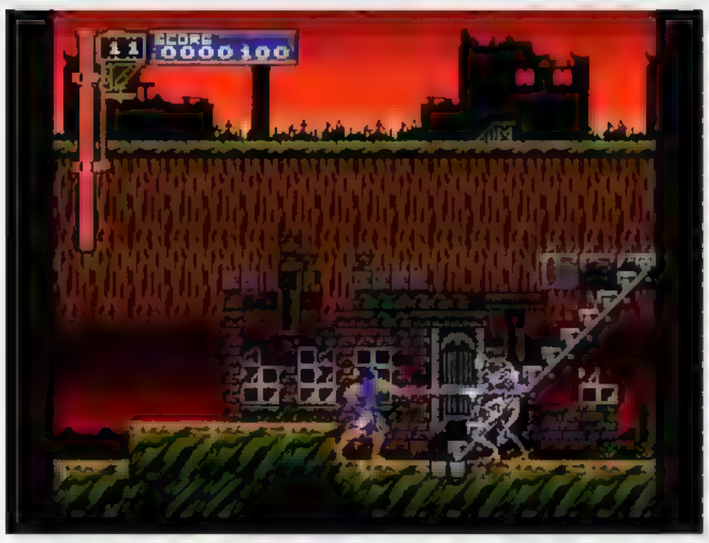
7 You can have up to four saved states per game. If saves are present, you'll see that the PC Engine icons will have Ten No Koe 2 units attached – a cute reference to an old memory peripheral.

8 This little icon represents how many people can play each game – most are one or two, but some games can go as high as five. The system only supports two controllers by default, though.

9 Options can be changed here. The most interesting ones are the menu themes, selectable wallpapers and display options, but you can also set your language and view the credits here.

10 You can choose how you'd like the games to be sorted here – by game format, release date or alphabetically. Unfortunately, there's no ability to sort games by multiplayer support.

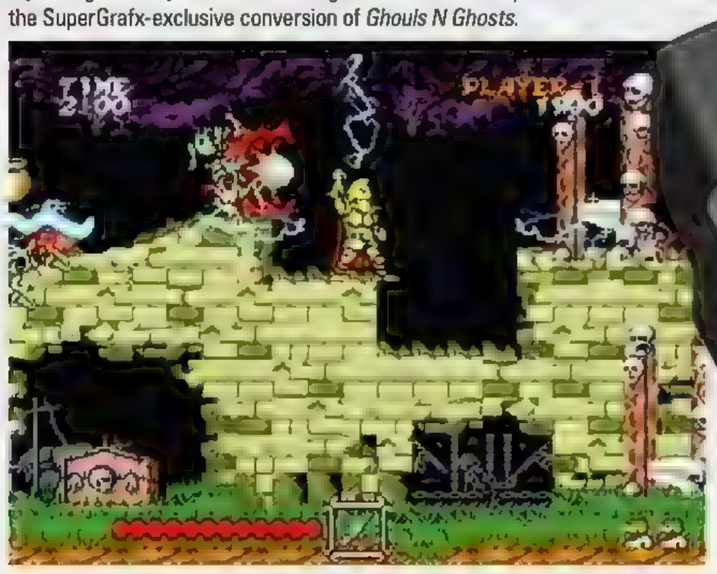
» [PC Engine Mini] Despite not being the best-known console, the PC Engine isn't short of well-known games like *Castlevania*.



» [PC Engine Mini] Games like *Galaga 88* felt authentic, with no noticeable emulation issues during our preview session.

» [PC Engine Mini] A game like *Sapphire* will easily cost you at least a few times the price of a basic PC Engine Mini package.

» [PC Engine Mini] Even most PC Engine owners can't experience the SuperGrafx-exclusive conversion of *Ghouls N Ghosts*.



BREAKING THE BORDERS

HOW KONAMI'S CONSOLE OFFERS A TRULY INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Unlike most mini consoles, the PC Engine Mini game line-ups are almost identical in each region, with a fairly even mixture of Japanese and US versions on both systems. That's a good thing, as losing Japanese games would severely limit the system's appeal. Players outside of Japan will lose out on Hudson's RPG *Tengai Makyou II* and Konami's hit dating sim *Tokimeki Memorial*, both of which require the ability to read Japanese. To make up for it, they'll get the rather good HuCard version of *Salamander*. The only other difference in terms of games concerns *Splatterhouse* – the US version removes a little religious iconography and puts Rick in a red mask, while Japan gets the uncensored version. Really, the biggest regional difference between PC Engine Mini consoles is the casing – CoreGrafx in Europe, TurboGrafx-16 in North America and original PC Engine in Japan.

GAME	ORIGINAL FORMAT	REGION	CORE GRAFX		TURBOGRAFX MINI
Air Zonk	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Aldynes	SuperGrafx	JP	✓	✓	✓
Alien Crush	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Appare! Gateball	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Blazing Lazers	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Bomberman 93	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Bomberman 94	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Bomberman: Panic Bomber	SuperGrafx	JP	✓	✓	✓
Bonk's Adventure	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Bonk's Revenge	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Cadash	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood	SuperGrafx	JP	✓	✓	✓
Chew Man Fu	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
China Warrior	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Cho Aniki	SuperGrafx	JP	✓	✓	✓
Dragon Spirit	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Dungeon Explorer	HuCard	US+JP	✓	✓	✓
Fantasy Zone	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Galaga 88	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
The Genji And The Heike Clans	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Ghouls 'N Ghosts	SuperGrafx	JP	✓	✓	✓
Ginga Fukei Densetsu Sapphire	Arcade CD-ROM	JP	✓	✓	✓
Gradius	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Gradius II: Gofer No Yabou	[illegible]	JP	✓	✓	✓
JJ & Jeff	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Jaseiken Necromancer	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Lords Of Thunder	[illegible]	US	✓	✓	✓
Military Madness/Nectaris	HuCard	US+JP	✓	✓	✓
Moto Roader	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Neutopia	HuCard	US+JP	✓	✓	✓
Neutopia II	HuCard	US+JP	✓	✓	✓
New Adventure Island	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Ninja Gaiden	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Ninja Spirit	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Parasol Stars	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Power Golf	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Psychosis	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
R-Type	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Salamander	HuCard	JP	✓	✗	✓
Seirei Senshi Spriggan	[illegible]	JP	✓	✓	✓
Snatcher	[illegible]	JP	✓	✓	✓
Soldier Blade	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Space Harrier	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Splatterhouse	HuCard	US+JP	✓	✓	✓
Spriggan Mark 2: Re-Terraform Project	[illegible]	JP	✓	✓	✓
Star Parodier	[illegible]	JP	✓	✓	✓
Super Darius	[illegible]	JP	✓	✓	✓
Super Momotaro Dentetsu II	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Super Star Soldier	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Tengai Makyou II: Manji Maru	[illegible]	JP	✗	✓	✗
Tokimeki Memorial	[illegible]	JP	✗	✓	✗
Valkyrie No Densetsu	HuCard	JP	✓	✓	✓
Victory Run	HuCard	US	✓	✓	✓
Ys Book I & II	[illegible]	US+JP	✓	✓	✓

"KONAMI HAS DONE A PRETTY GREAT JOB OF CHOOSING A WIDE SELECTION OF STYLES FOR THE MINI"
PAUL WELLER

» [PC Engine Mini] M2 has offered more display options here than it did on the Mega Drive Mini.

» [PC Engine Mini] The CRT filter is quite strong, just like on the Mega Drive Mini.

▶ *Of Valkyrie*. It's great that companies are now not afraid to throw in games from different regions although it is a shame some of these choices will just be borderline unplayable."

As well as taking an unusual approach to regional representation, Konami has included a large number of games – 57 in total (or 58, on the Japanese version), though we'll give that number a little scrutiny later on. In any case, it's a selection that hits all the key selling points, offering high-quality games, high-value games and as Paul points out, a good representation of the system's library. "At a casual glance it would be easy for people to assume that most of the PC Engine library consists of shoot-'em-ups, and while that's true to a point, there are so many other genres that are well represented," he says. "Konami has done a pretty great job of choosing a wide selection of styles for the Mini, as well as picking both early and later games which will give a nice timeline of how developers were able to keep pushing the machine to its limits over the years." Indeed, the system is a great buy for fans of shoot-'em-ups – there are over a dozen here, ranging from excellent conversions of *R-Type* and *Gradius* to classic original games like *Blazing Lazers* and *Soldier Blade*.

» [PC Engine Mini] In a cute touch, this is a PC Engine GT with Japanese games and a Turbo Express when playing American games.

However, the high number of games included means there's still plenty of variety. "The highlights here are pretty predictable for those with a passing knowledge of the library: *Dracula X* is the obvious 'big gun' in the listing, followed by *Lords Of Thunder*, the *Bonk* titles and *Dungeon Explorer*," says Paul. "The addition of *Ys Book I & II* is my personal highlight, as it is my favourite PC Engine title and worth owning for the epic soundtrack alone. It is also very nice to see *Star Parodier*, which is a superb *Parodius*-style parody of Hudson's *Star Soldier* shoot-'em-up series."

Another great thing about the PC Engine Mini is the way it comprehensively covers the system's library. While we loved the Mega Drive Mini and felt that it did a great job of covering the Mega Drive library, it would have been great to have seen the best of the Mega-CD and 32X included on the system, too. The PC Engine Mini goes far further in this regard. "I was surprised to see a couple of SuperGrafx titles in there," says Paul. "*Daimakaimura* [*Ghouls 'N Ghosts*] is really an excellent conversion, although *Aldynes* is variable in quality. But there really isn't that much to pick from." The software included on the PC Engine Mini includes regular HuCard games, games from the CD-ROM, Super CD-ROM and Arcade CD-ROM formats, and even a couple of games for the ill-fated SuperGrafx. The only omission is the LaserDisc-based LD-ROM games, which were only available to LaserActive owners. As a result, you can feel confident that you're getting a taste of every aspect of the PC Engine experience, from the early hits to the games that utilised the system's full potential.

Of course every mini console has its weaker games, and the PC Engine Mini is no exception, though most of this comes down to language issues rather than game quality. "Given that the selection does vary between regions, some of the inclusions are somewhat mind-boggling," says Paul. "*Appare! Gate Ball* is just a dreadful and simplistic game based on croquet, *Super Momotaro Dentetsu II* relies on so much Japanese as to make it almost worthless for western players, as do some of the Japanese region role-playing games that are included. *Snatcher* is also untranslated and while it is a fantastic game, it will just frustrate people that cannot understand what is going on. I can't think why Konami didn't just replace these (and alternate region duplicates) with more accessible titles, especially adding a few more CD games that really show off the capabilities of the machine." Of course, as we learned from the PlayStation Classic, retro consoles can be defined by what is missing as much as what is actually present, but Paul thinks most of the key games have been hit. "The only gaping hole is *Gate Of Thunder*," he points out. "Developed by ex-Technosoft staff, this is one of the greatest shooters of the era (and of all time, in my opinion) so I am very disappointed that it is not included."

For what it's worth, we found *Appare! Gateball* to offer a weird novelty appeal, but your mileage may vary. However, the criticism of *Snatcher* is something we picked up on, and it's not the only Japanese game that players will struggle with – the likes of *Necromancer* will also prove difficult. "*Snatcher* is a very important game in the history of PC Engine, and gaming more broadly, and we felt that leaving this out entirely would be a disservice to the legacy of the console – and to our fans," says Richard, when asked about the inclusion of such games. "*Necromancer* represents an interesting turn-based RPG, which showcases another genre that [the] Western PC Engine would otherwise miss out on."

We came away from our preview session with a positive impression of the system and its games, finding little to complain about. We do have two, though. Firstly, while the PC Engine Mini does have more games than the SNES or Mega Drive mini consoles, we feel that marketing the system as having 57 games included is a bit misleading. Five games are counted twice as they're included in both their Japanese and English forms, so it's really more like 52. The system still offers a great number of games, but it's not quite as far ahead of the competition as the marketing would have you believe. As Paul has pointed out, you'll find that some of them are essentially unplayable without Japanese language skills. On one hand, this is understandable as those games never received English-language PC Engine releases, and it wouldn't be a simple task to create them. On the other hand, M2 has a reputation for going above and beyond with projects like this, and given that an English script already exists for *Snatcher* thanks to the Mega-CD version, we're guessing the budget just wasn't there to make it happen. The second problem is that M2 has once again used a nearest neighbour scaling approach, which causes horizontal shimmering during scrolling during certain games in 4:3 mode. This can be alleviated with the use of the CRT filter or a different video mode, but we'd like to have had an option for some interpolation.

These slight quibbles don't detract from the fact that based on first impressions, the PC Engine Mini is another strong entry into the increasingly competitive retro plug-and-play market. We're fascinated to see how players will receive it due to its unique position, and we can only imagine what might be possible if it turns out to be a success – there's every chance that we could see rival products offering more import games, or maybe Konami could revisit its extensive MSX catalogue. As always, we'll hold off delivering a definitive verdict until we can review a final retail unit, but the PC Engine Mini is definitely one to watch.

» [PC Engine Mini] The system's menu is clean and easy to navigate, and the only major feature omission is a rewind mode.

PC Engine mini HIGHLIGHTS

Whether you're wondering why you should buy a PC Engine Mini or simply trying to decide what game you'll play first when you get yours, a guide to the best games on the device is always handy. Here are our picks for the cream of the crop

AKUMAJOU DRACULA X: CHI NO RONDO (CASTLEVANIA: RONDO OF BLOOD)

DEVELOPER: Konami **YEAR RELEASED:** 1993 **GENRE:** Platformer

When the PC Engine Mini was first announced and the inclusion of CD-based games wasn't yet confirmed, there was a sense of anxiety in the **Retro Gamer** office. "What will we do," we asked ourselves, "if it doesn't have *Castlevania*?" Thankfully, Konami didn't let us down. That all might sound a little dramatic, but this really is the crown jewel in the PC Engine Mini's software line-up. It's got the three key things you want from a centrepiece game in a retro collection – it's recognisable due to its series, it's desirable due to being hard to get in its original form (expect to pay over £100), and it's a superb game that still holds up fantastically today.

Rondo Of Blood comes from the old school of *Castlevania* design, the era of linear stages and temporary power-ups, rather than the open maps and RPG-style upgrades that were introduced by *Symphony Of The Night*. Arguably, this is the best game in that style, even with stiff competition from the likes of *Castlevania III*, *Super Castlevania IV* and *Castlevania: Bloodlines*. While it doesn't introduce any enormous innovations, every aspect of the game represents *Castlevania* at its most refined. The level design is exquisite, and you can't see everything in a single run thanks to the four hidden stages. The boss encounters are superb, not least because of the way Konami raises the tension with little introductory scenes. The graphics are excellent, with backgrounds that make clever use of the PC Engine hardware to produce a parallax effect and some enormous, highly detailed enemy sprites, and the audio is great whether it's coming from the CD or the PC Engine's sound chip.

While the game is available elsewhere now, thanks to the likes of the *Dracula X Collection* on PSP and the more recent digital bundle with *Symphony Of The Night*, this is still easily a reason to pick up a PC Engine Mini on its own – it's *that* good.

R-TYPE

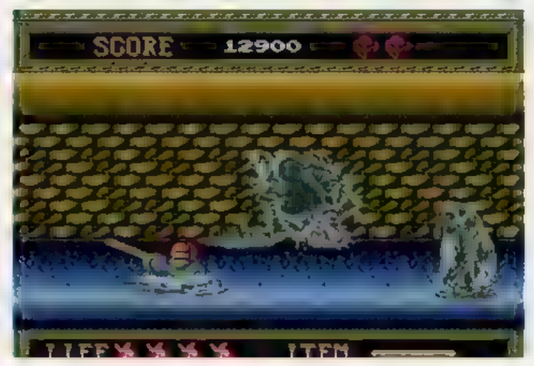
DEVELOPER: Hudson Soft
YEAR RELEASED: 1988
GENRE: Shoot-'em-up

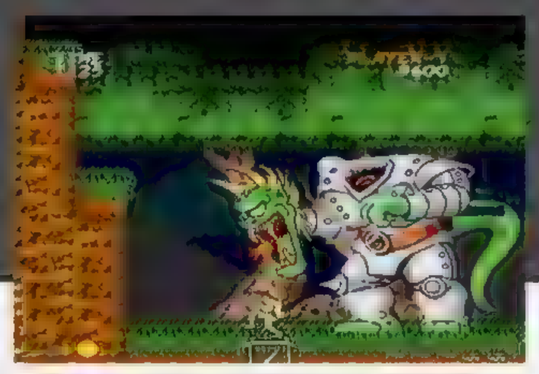
Back in the late Eighties this conversion of Irem's classic arcade blaster was a self-contained argument for buying a PC Engine, as you simply couldn't get anything closer to the arcade game. This is the US HuCard version, so it's the full game but doesn't have the remixed soundtrack of the Japanese CD version.

SPLATTERHOUSE

DEVELOPER: Namco
YEAR RELEASED: 1990
GENRE: Beat-'em-up

This is an excellent conversion of the simple but enormously satisfying arcade horror brawler. American and European systems feature the US version, which gives Rick a copyright-friendly red mask and removes some religious symbols – if you want the uncensored Japanese version, you'll need to pick up a Japanese PC Engine Mini.

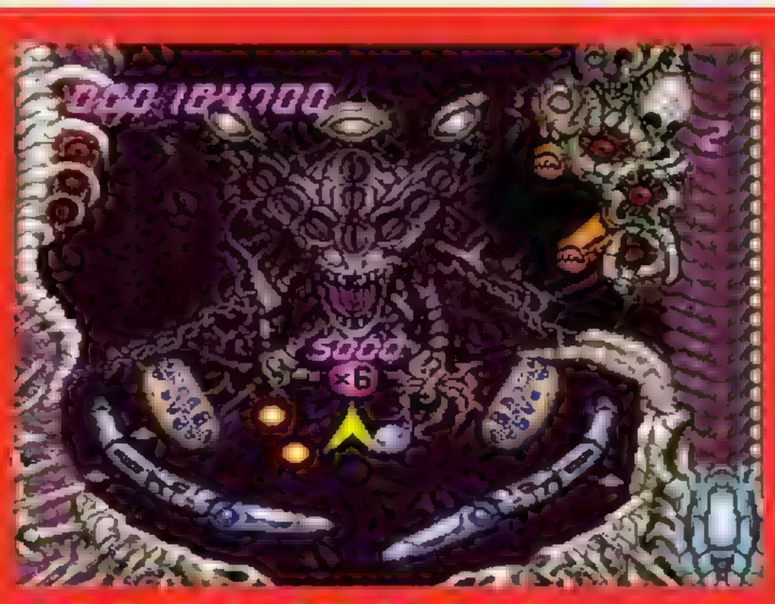




DAIMAKAIMURA (GHOULS 'N GHOSTS)

DEVELOPER: NEC Avenue
YEAR RELEASED: 1990
GENRE: Platformer

When Capcom's rock-hard arcade platformer came to the PC Engine, it did so in style. Unfortunately, it was released for the beefed-up SuperGrafx model which made a minimal impact on the market, so few have had the opportunity to sample this rather good conversion. This is the best way to do it.

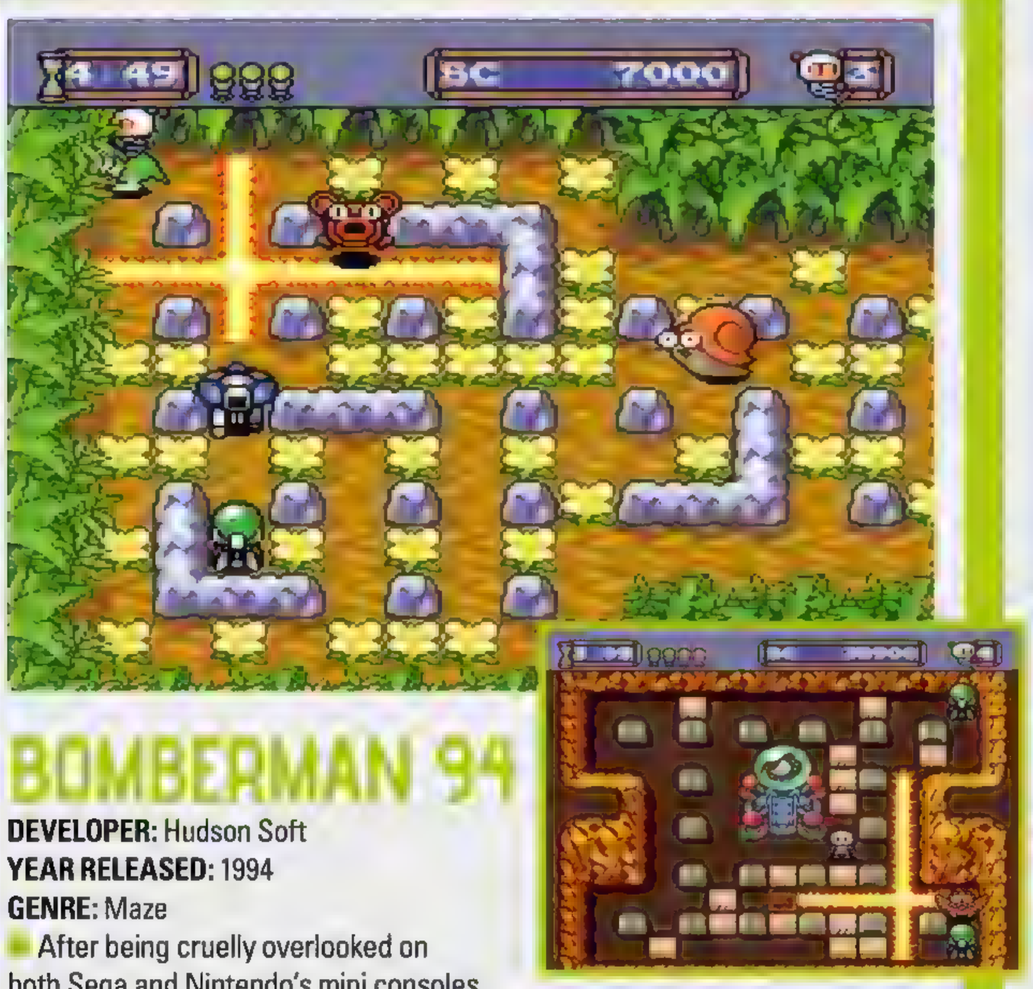


ALIEN CRUSH

DEVELOPER: Compile **YEAR RELEASED:** 1988 **GENRE:** Pinball

We always find pinball videogames are at their best when they do something that physical tables just can't offer, and *Alien Crush* does so with style – a style that just happens to be inspired by, that is to say, nicked from, HR Giger's work on the *Alien* films. Bugs burst forth from bumpers that act as cocoons, alien heads function as knockdown targets and there are aliens and teeth everywhere. While the graphical style and moving parts are cool, the best bit of *Alien Crush* is the bonus games which take place on another table entirely and task you with activating bumpers, destroying centipede-like aliens or even knocking floating skulls out of the space station. The only minor flaw is that the table doesn't scroll, instead using a fuck-screen system.

Some fans may be upset not to see the sequel *Devil Crash* included – and we understand that, since it is superior in general. However, *Alien Crush* is still a very good pinball game, and a worthy inclusion on the PC Engine Mini.



BOMBERMAN 94

DEVELOPER: Hudson Soft
YEAR RELEASED: 1994
GENRE: Maze

After being cruelly overlooked on both Sega and Nintendo's mini consoles, *Bomberman* gets a chance to shine on the PC Engine Mini. If you're already familiar with the Mega Drive game *Mega Bomberman* you'll be right at home here, as that was a conversion of this game with only minor changes such as new music and minor graphical alterations.

If you're playing solo, your task is to eliminate enemies roaming the mazes and defeat bosses to restore the broken Planet Bomber. But *Bomberman*'s reputation as a classic rests on its multiplayer appeal, and as you might expect this is one of the best multiplayer games on PC Engine Mini, with up to five players supported when using the multitap. The big new feature compared to *Bomberman 93* (also on the system) is the introduction of the Louies, cute animals that Bomberman can ride. As well as shielding him from one hit, they grant extra powers like fast dashes and the ability to punt bombs over walls.

DUNGEON EXPLORER

DEVELOPER: Atlus **YEAR RELEASED:** 1989 **GENRE:** Action RPG

The king of Odessia has a quest for you – find the Ora stone and drive away the aliens that have taken over the land! Before setting off for adventure, each player chooses a character from a variety of different classes including fighter, thief, witch, elf and bard. Together, you roam around mazelike environments fighting hordes of enemies that constantly spawn from generators. This might sound a lot like *Gauntlet*, and that's a great point of comparison, but Hudson's game has elements that bring it closer to a traditional RPG. You can take your time as there's no need to constantly fill up on food, and you'll encounter people that you can talk to as well as simple puzzles.

Dungeon Explorer is good fun alone, but it's the multiplayer that makes it one of the PC Engine's lesser known gems. It supports up to five players with the multitap, so if you're looking to get plenty of players involved with your PC Engine Mini and don't fancy another round of *Bomberman*, this is the game for you.

MILITARY MADNESS

DEVELOPER: Hudson Soft **YEAR RELEASED:** 1989 **GENRE:** Strategy

In this futuristic turn-based strategy game, mankind has colonised the moon. Great! Unfortunately, the evil axis powers have decided to start a war up there, with the goal of launching an attack on the unsuspecting people of Earth. Oh no! Your job is to take command of the allied forces and stop them from completing their deadly plan.

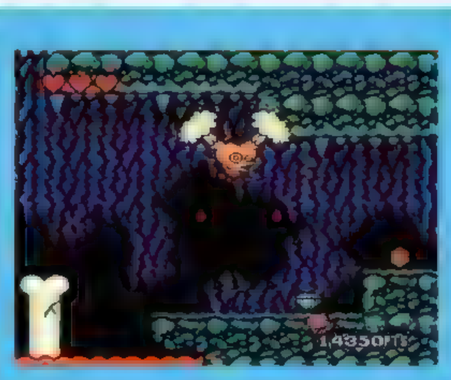
If you've ever played any of the *Nectaris* games that followed this (there are PlayStation and Game Boy versions, amongst others) or something like *Advance Wars*, this will be a familiar experience. You control troops and vehicles placed on a hex grid, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, and direct them to attack enemy units. Though you can't produce new troops of your own, it's possible to win enemy units by capturing enemy factories. The game was well-received when it was originally released and still holds up very well today. Better yet, its inclusion on the PC Engine Mini provides some diversity and mental challenge to keep you occupied between hardcore shoot-'em-up sessions.

YS BOOK I & II

DEVELOPER: Alfa System
YEAR RELEASED: 1989
GENRE: Action RPG

Falcom's most famous early game has possibly the simplest combat system in any game ever, but running into enemies off-centre is a surprisingly pleasurable process no matter how often you repeat it – plus, it's not always easy in the game's dense dungeons, which will provide a fun test for any adventurer. While *Ys* might not have originated on the PC Engine, this version is easily the best of the early efforts. The game received a full graphical makeover, with the most notable addition being animated cinematic sequences that take full advantage of the CD format. Likewise, the use of CD audio enables voice acting in those scenes, as well as amazing arrangements of the tunes composed by Yuzo Koshiro and Mieko Ishikawa.

BONK'S REVENGE



PARASOL STARS

DEVELOPER: Taito **YEAR RELEASED:** 1991
GENRE: Platformer

The third entry in the *Bubble Bobble* series rarely receives as much attention as the original or even *Rainbow Islands*. That's a shame because it's fantastic, but somewhat understandable as it went straight to PC Engine rather than appearing in arcades. It's closer in structure to the original rather than *Rainbow Islands* – the goal is to clear the screen of enemies in small stages. You do this with the use of your parasol, a truly multipurpose tool – as well as using it to float around and shield yourself, you can use it to throw enemies. However, its best use is collecting droplets, which can be lobbed to unleash a variety of elemental attacks on your foes.

GINGA FUKEI DENSETSU SAPPHIRE

[illegible]

[illegible]

LORDS OF THUNDER

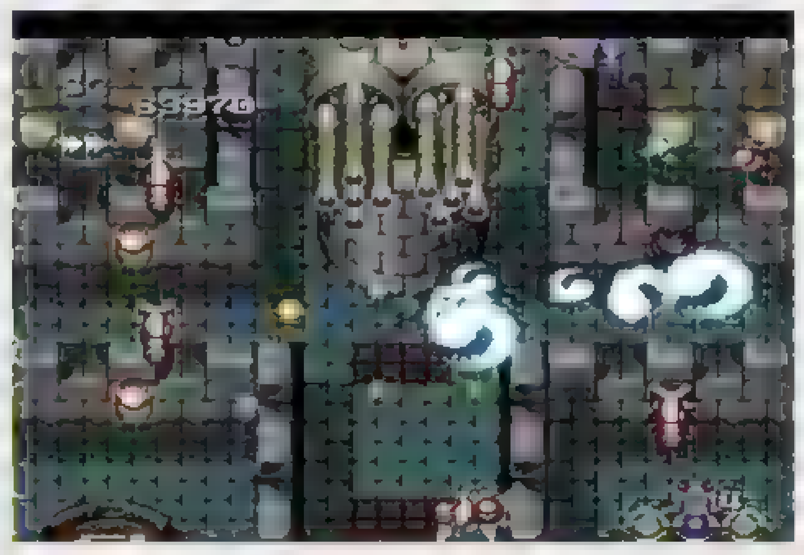
DEVELOPER: Red Company
YEAR RELEASED: 1993
GENRE: Shoot-'em-up

This brilliant shooter moved away from the space theme of its predecessor, *Gate Of Thunder*, and instead went for a fantasy theme with weapons themed around elemental powers. That wasn't the only change, as a new level system and item shops were introduced, giving the game a bit more in the way of strategy to go with the frantic blasting. Thankfully, the developers kept the excellent rock soundtrack and the graphics are amongst the best you'll see on the PC Engine.

STAR PARODIER

DEVELOPER: Kaneko
YEAR RELEASED: 1992
GENRE: Shoot-'em-up

If you've never heard of *Star Parodier* before, think of it as the *Star Soldier* series' equivalent to what *Parodius* is to *Gradius*. It's a colourful take on the series with silly enemies and an upbeat soundtrack – but it's also a game that matches the high quality of the series that it parodies, with exemplary design, graphics and sound. This is also a relatively gentle game in terms of difficulty, so it's a good first challenge before tackling the others on the system.



SEIREI SENSHI SPRIGGAN

DEVELOPER: Compile
YEAR RELEASED: 1991
GENRE: Shoot-'em-up

Compile has been responsible for plenty of excellent shooters over the years, and there's more than one on this console. But where *Blazing Lazers* is relatively well known due to its North American release, *Spriggan* isn't quite as famous outside of the PC Engine community. It's a belter, though – as well as being fantastic to look at, the game is well designed and features an excellent power-up system which requires you to mix and match coloured orbs to access different types of weapons.

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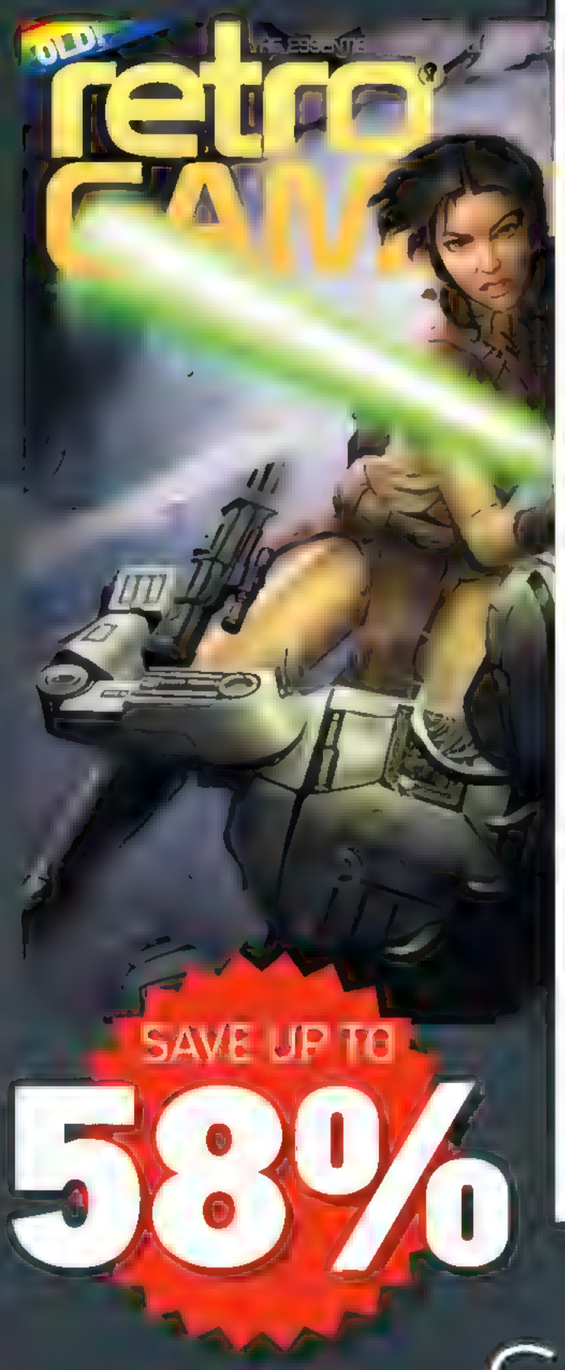

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CLASSIC MOMENTS

Phantasy Star

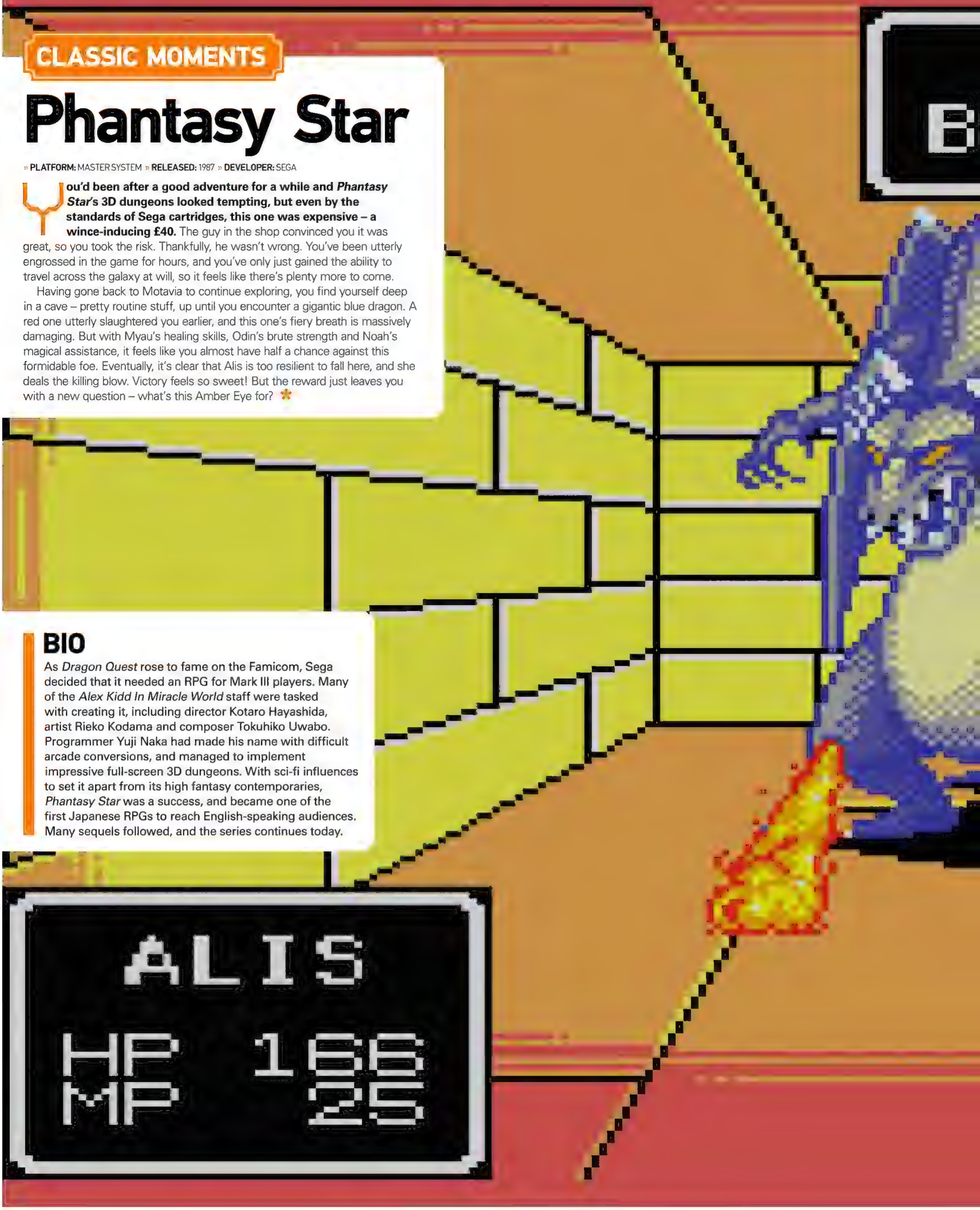
» **PLATFORM:** MASTER SYSTEM » **RELEASED:** 1987 » **DEVELOPER:** SEGA

You'd been after a good adventure for a while and *Phantasy Star*'s 3D dungeons looked tempting, but even by the standards of Sega cartridges, this one was expensive – a wince-inducing £40. The guy in the shop convinced you it was great, so you took the risk. Thankfully, he wasn't wrong. You've been utterly engrossed in the game for hours, and you've only just gained the ability to travel across the galaxy at will, so it feels like there's plenty more to come.

Having gone back to Motavia to continue exploring, you find yourself deep in a cave – pretty routine stuff, up until you encounter a gigantic blue dragon. A red one utterly slaughtered you earlier, and this one's fiery breath is massively damaging. But with Myau's healing skills, Odin's brute strength and Noah's magical assistance, it feels like you almost have half a chance against this formidable foe. Eventually, it's clear that Alis is too resilient to fall here, and she deals the killing blow. Victory feels so sweet! But the reward just leaves you with a new question – what's this Amber Eye for?

BIO

As *Dragon Quest* rose to fame on the Famicom, Sega decided that it needed an RPG for Mark III players. Many of the *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* staff were tasked with creating it, including director Kotaro Hayashida, artist Rieko Kodama and composer Tokuhiko Uwabo. Programmer Yuji Naka had made his name with difficult arcade conversions, and managed to implement impressive full-screen 3D dungeons. With sci-fi influences to set it apart from its high fantasy contemporaries, *Phantasy Star* was a success, and became one of the first Japanese RPGs to reach English-speaking audiences. Many sequels followed, and the series continues today.



MORE CLASSIC PHANTASY STAR MOMENTS

Piece Of Cake

You need to see the governor of Motavia, but you can't see him without bringing a gift. What he really wants is some shortcake. Unfortunately for you, the only bakery in the area happens to be in the depths of a dungeon. The shopkeeper even apologises for this bizarre choice of location, which brings up one question – why put it there in the first place?

A Bad Dream

The governor has decided to give you his assistance in bringing down the tyrannical Lassic, and insists that you spend a night at his residence. Unfortunately, when you do, you enter an impossible fight against a shadowy, nightmarish foe. You wake up when you lose – but is this really a bad dream, or a terrible sign of things to come?

Super Best Friends

It takes quite a bit of time to finally get Noah (or Lutz, if you're playing the Japanese version) to join your party, but it's well worth all the effort once you do. He doesn't have the physical attack prowess of Odin, Alis or even Myau, but he's capable of casting various devastating spells, and is the final member needed to complete the quartet.

A Whole New World

Having a large world is always a bonus in any RPG, but *Phantasy Star* took things a step further when it came to scale by setting the game across three planets. Once you've explored the verdant forests of Palma and the seemingly endless deserts of Motavia, it's a real treat to finally land on the bleak, frozen planet of Dezoris.

THE MAKING OF

FOOTBALLER OF THE YEAR ©

From its peculiar origin to a brand-new videogame subgenre, we delve into the history behind this trailblazing simulator that combines both action and strategy to create a unique footballing videogame experience. Game on!

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

PUBLISHER: GREMLIN GRAPHICS

DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

RELEASED: 1986

PLATFORM: C64, VARIOUS

GENRE: SPORTS SIM

By the mid-Eighties, 8-bit football videogames were still dominated by a triad of three titles: *Match Day* on the ZX Spectrum, *International Soccer* on the Commodore 64, and management smash hit *Football Manager* on practically every format going. Many challenged, but few competed, before 1986 saw a glut of football games appearing as publishers sought to take advantage of the World Cup, set in Mexico.

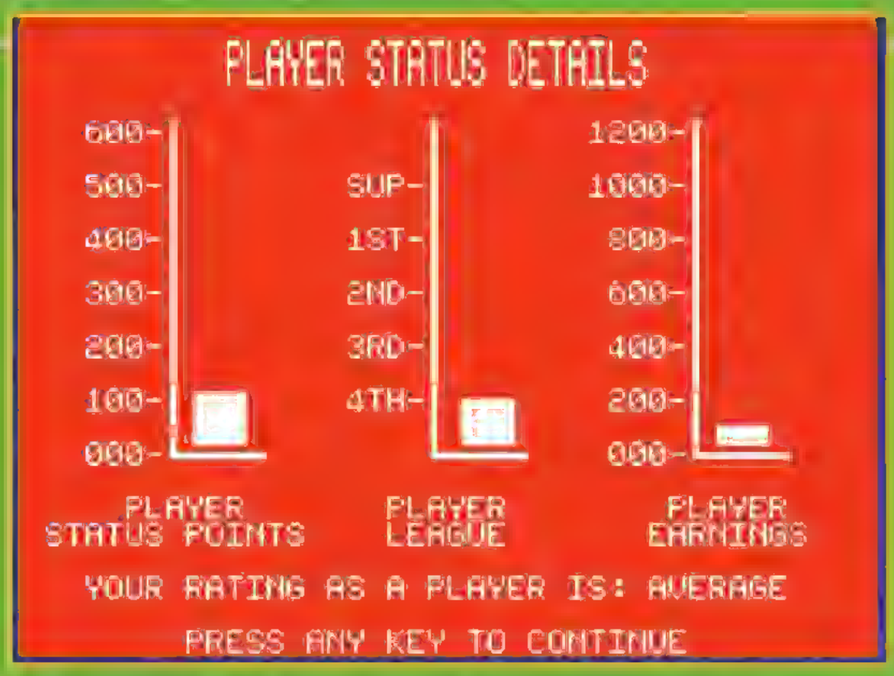
"The football strategy game to answer every boyhood dream," is the claim on the back of *Footballer Of The Year*'s inlay, and its unique selling point is the way that the player takes control of a singular character, the footballing world at your feet as a 17-year-old fourth-division striker. "The first I heard about the game was when Kevin Norburn handed me a folder full of paper, and a package with bits of card and stuff in it," begins Chris Shrigley, one of Gremlin's cadre of in-house coders. Along with his friends, Andy Green and Robert Toone, Chris had impressed Gremlin with the bouncing ball game, *Bounder*. "Then we did *Future Knight*, which was our *Ghosts 'N Goblins* knock-off, and although original, it lacked inspiration and was a bit rubbish," he notes modestly. Both of those games were a team effort in terms of coding, but for his next project, Chris was flying solo. "I was assigned *Footballer Of The Year*, and up until that point I had always worked with Andy [Green]. We were a bit of a double act, and because we always did one game at a time it worked out that way. But as there were multiple projects to be done now we were at Gremlin, it was inevitable that we'd be split up."

> "I was excited to be working on something on my own that was apparently quite important"
> Chris Shrigley

Chris Shrigley, the man behind the C64, Atari and CTB versions of *Footballer Of The Year*

[BBC Micro] Have you got what it takes to rise through the rankings?

[C64] He shoots... and misses! Better luck next time, eh?



[ZX Spectrum] The 'Player Status' screen is a handy way of checking your progress.

The package that Chris was handed by his colleague was an unusual one for a software house such as Gremlin Graphics to receive. "We were used to getting demos and full games sent in to look at," says Chris, "and I still remember *Jack The Nipper* showing up one day, and us all falling in love with it. So yeah, it was odd, but it was really an elaborate game design document, which gave us a good base to build on." Gremlin Graphics boss Ian Stewart picks up the story. "Two brothers from Reading had contacted us, and we invited them to Sheffield to see what they had," he tells us. "They basically wanted a computer game made based on the board game that they had created." With the brothers also attempting to sell the original paper version (more on that later), an interim videogame interpretation was given the go-ahead, with Gremlin eyeing up that World Cup as a useful marketing tool.

In *Footballer Of The Year*, the player begins as a fresh-faced teenaged trainee, ready for action at a fourth-division club of your choosing. Although the option to begin in other leagues is presented at the start, beginning at a higher level so young makes the game extremely difficult, with the necessary equipment prohibitively expensive. With the overall aim of achieving the eponymous accolade, each match is an important step in the career of this up-and-coming star. To help you, there are a series of cards that can be purchased before each match. Incident cards generate a specific event which can either be beneficial or detrimental, and operate randomly; transfer cards summon a scout who will engineer a move to another club if suitably impressed; and the most important, goal cards, which give the player between one and three attempts on goal, with the game switching from its text management simulation to an arcade-style shooting section. "It was a bit of a dogpile, the design," recalls Chris. "Terry Lloyd, Rob Toone, Simon Hulbert and myself were all involved, and even Ian [Stewart] and Kev [Norburn] had some input. I was busying myself prepping for the project and panicking about doing my first solo game, but the design came together quickly – the original [board] game was really detailed, so the final design for the Commodore 64 game was almost exactly the same."

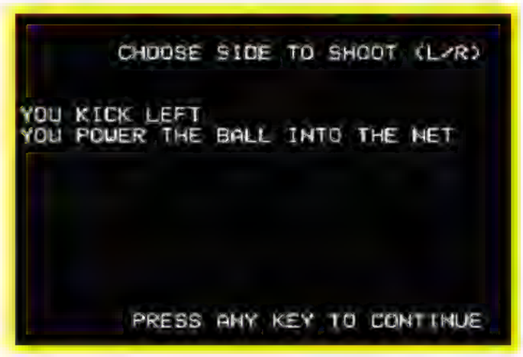
Up until *Footballer Of The Year*, Chris' and Andy [Green]'s workloads had been divided up within each project. "I never got to work on a whole game," explains Chris, "instead working on different pieces like the scroller, interrupts, sprite routines and parts of the game logic. It was a comfortable setup, but a bit of a luxury. So I was excited to be working on something on my own that was apparently quite important, and also scared shitless because I'd never written an entire game by myself before." Development for *Footballer Of The Year* began on Chris' favoured platform, the Commodore 64. "The design was pretty much as per the original board game, with some additions like the interactive shootout stuff. There were other considerations around graphics and memory, but that was typical." These arcade-style sections saw the player presented with a goal mouth, defenders, goalkeeper and the ball. Select a side to shoot, hope the goalie misses, and it's score one for the new super striker. Occasionally a penalty shootout will occur, with

[ZX Spectrum] Watching the simulated teleprinter can be a tense affair...

CONVERSION CAPERS

ATARI 8-BIT

The most significant absences here are the game's icons, reduced to a basic numbered menu. The goal section is present, however, although the stadium looks more Chelmsford City than Chelsea. Nonetheless, a decent enough conversion by Chris Shrigley himself.

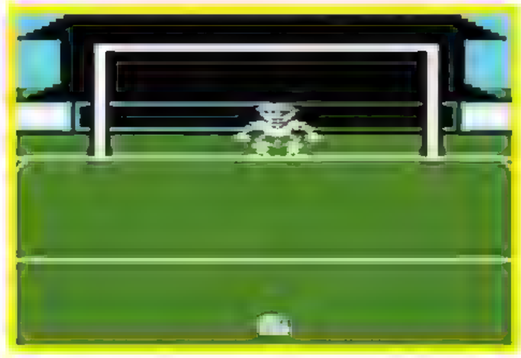


COMMODORE 16

Predictably pared down when compared to its siblings, plus the arcade-style sections are again absent on this junior Commodore computer. The colourful icons remain, however, as does much of *Footballer Of The Year*'s core gameplay elements, and the title screen tune.

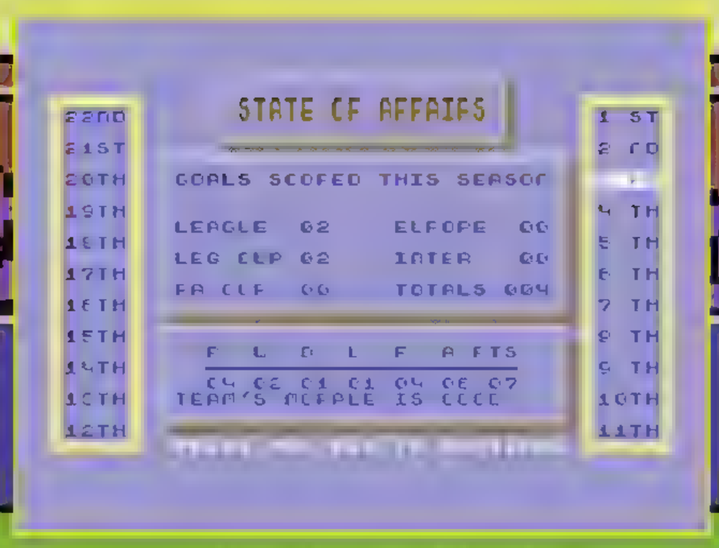
AMSTRAD CPC

With its sweet cartoonish graphics and jaunty tune, this Amstrad version is almost a Premier League standard contender. It plays speedily, most of the options are present and there's even a disinterested-looking crowd behind the goal. Come on, folks, it's not that boring!



BBC MICRO

The BBC version offers an elongated intro sequence explaining the various facets of *Footballer Of The Year*, yet again lacks the nice icons of the C64 game. Also gone are the arcade-style sections, with a binary left/right choice the only input available. Unlikely to make the shortlist.



"It was a significant project for me and I learned an awful lot about making all of a game"

Chris Shrigley

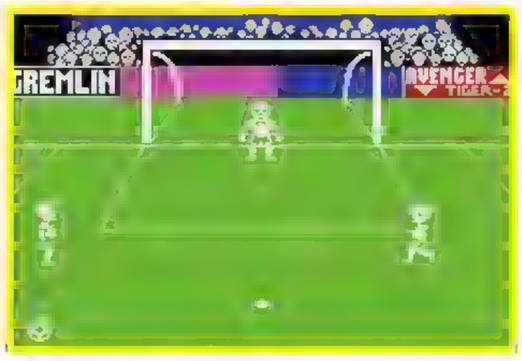
HOW DID THE LONE STRIKER FARE ON EACH PLATFORM?

MSX

Despite being graphically similar to the pleasant ZX Spectrum game, this MSX conversion comes off as a bit lacking when it comes to audio, but otherwise it remains an absorbing player management game on a system which generally lacked decent footie sims.

COMMODORE 64

Featuring the best graphics, the most extensive gameplay and the finest music, the Commodore 64 original of *Footballer* is the standard by which all others fall. Smooth and entertaining, the progress of the star player is best tracked here. The version to beat.



ZX SPECTRUM

Neat icons and acceptable graphics are just about good enough in this conversion from Greg Holmes and co. Its was praised in the pages of *Crash* magazine, despite reservations surrounding the ease of play. Some people are just never satisfied.

HIGH SCORE

6410 50000

Arkanoid

SOMEONE CALL A SPIN DOCTOR

» ARCADE » 1986 » TAITO

My first experience of this arcade classic from Taito was not in a greasy chip shop, or in my local smoke-infested arcade, but at my school.

It sounds crazy, of course, but when I was a teenager at school we had a youth club that we could visit at lunch breaks, and in addition to a pool table and a darts board, there was a lone arcade cabinet there. That machine was regularly replaced during the term I spent there (I'm pretty sure it was only accessible to fifth formers), and while I can't remember many of the games that were available, I do remember *Arkanoid*.

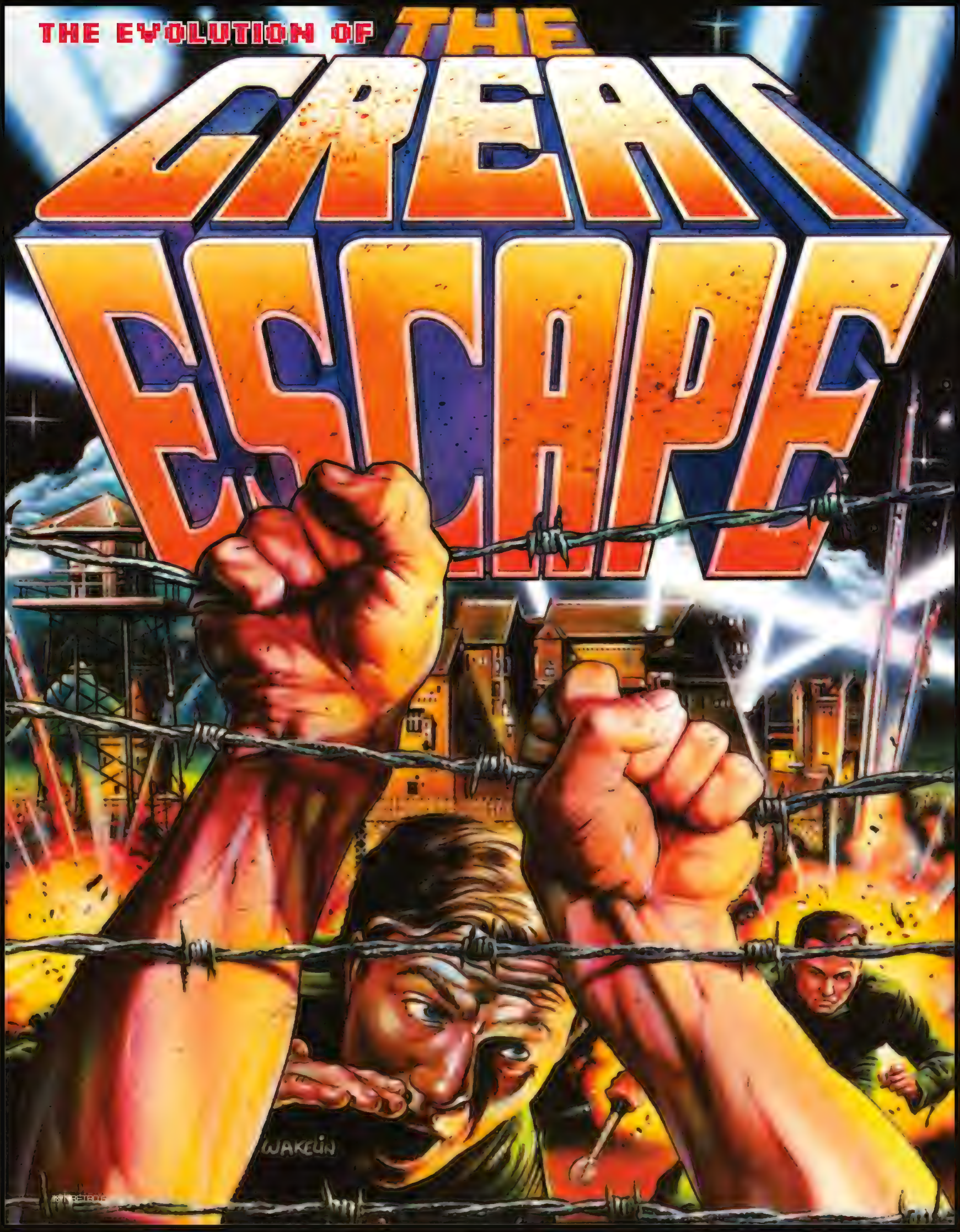
It left an impression on me for a couple of reasons. For starters it had a spinner, which was a world away from the joystick-based games we'd enjoyed before. It was tricky to use because it was so sensitive, meaning your bat/ship could slip across the screen if you applied too much pressure. This in turn led to many of my fellow students rapidly spinning it as quickly as possible in the hope that it would create a 'wall' with the bat which would continually throw the ball back at whatever block configuration was in front of them. Of course, that roughhousing broke the spinner, and there was nothing worse than putting a 10p coin into the machine and finding out the game was busted. You would be there futilely spinning the knob realising that it was impossible to reach the returning ball in time.

The *Arkanoid* machine was fixed several times over a few short weeks, and when it worked it was brilliant – largely because of its great range of power-ups that made demolishing those abstract walls a hell of a lot of fun. It didn't last, though, and eventually the school decided that it would be clearly cheaper to install an arcade machine with a more traditional set of controls. I'll be buggered if I can remember what it was, though.

THE EVOLUTION OF

THE SPEAR OF

WAKEUN



THE EVOLUTION OF: THE GREAT ESCAPE

Influenced by old war movies and intrigued by isometric adventures, John Heap created The Great Escape, and then took the format further with Where Time Stood Still and Wreckers. John explains how his critically acclaimed series evolved

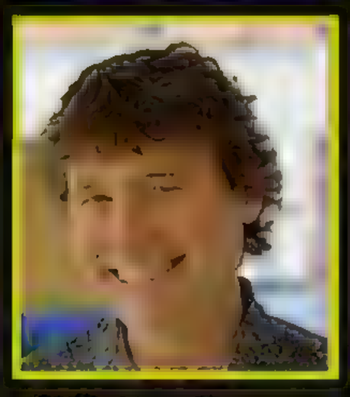
Words by Rory Milne

Following the bankruptcy of Imagine Software in the summer of 1984, a number of the firm's developers formed Denton Designs, and went on to produce the likes of *Frankie Goes To Hollywood* and *Shadowfire*. The latter was the first game that designer/coder John Heap worked on for the developer after joining it, but by the release of its sequel in early 1986 most of Denton's founders had left, giving its remaining members free rein, as John reflects. "It was a kind of a change, really, because the design for *The Great Escape* was done just after Denton Designs split, where the original directors went their own way," John says of his first project in charge. "Me and four others decided to continue, and basically we had a blank slate, so we just came up with designs that we could flog."

The initial ideas that John put together for his design described an escape scenario rendered in two dimensions, but his plans changed following feedback from an interested publisher. "I sat down and sketched the essence of a game where you were escaping from something; that was where *The Great Escape* came from," John remembers. "Originally it was a 2D scroller, and then some guy at Mirrorsoft – because we were touting it around – said it would be quite good in 3D, and I thought it could."

» [ZX Spectrum] Hiding objects in *The Great Escape*'s secret tunnels evolved from taking weapons from enemies in *Shadowfire*.

» [Amstrad CPC] *The Great Escape*'s searchlight is a nod to old black-and-white POW camp movies.



» John Heap is currently a senior software engineer at the University Of Liverpool's Computational Biology Facility.

"Because Great Escape was rule-based there were several ways out, although I might not have thought of all of them"
John Heap

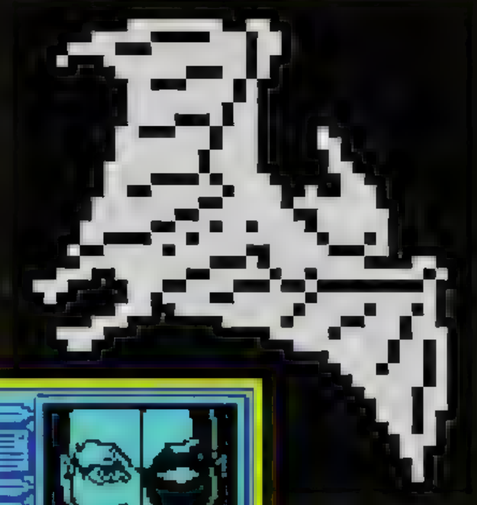
But although John's previous game had involved forced perspectives, his first exposure to isometric adventures was far more influential on his current design. "I'd toyed with *kind of* 3D viewing windows in *Enigma Force*," John notes, "and I had been looking satisfactorily at them when *Knight Lore* came out. I just thought: 'Oh fucking hell.' You know? Because I was so far behind, but now I knew it was possible. I remember getting *Ant Attack* out and measuring the angles on the telly with a ruler, because I didn't know what they were."

Having got to grips with isometric projection, John rethought his latest project in 3D, but he kept its POW camp setting, and its placeholder title too, until a publisher was secured. "It was called '*Stalag 13*' for a long time, or something like that," John reveals. "It was like old black-and-white war movies rather than *The Great Escape*. It wasn't a film licence, it wasn't anything to do with the film, it was just that Ocean thought it would be a good name. The film didn't really guide the game's narrative, apart from just the general theme of escape films."

In fact, John's design sharply contrasted the Sixties action movie, and instead of a larger- ▶

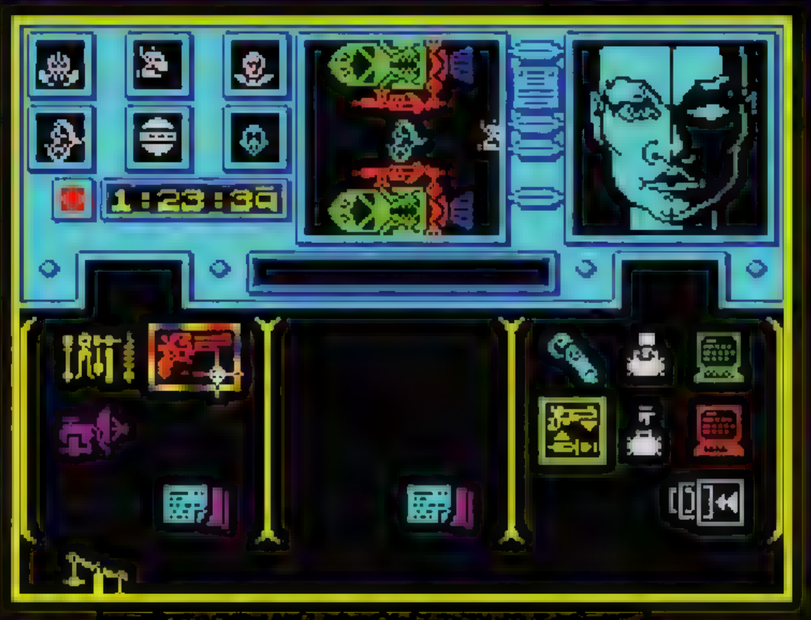
» [PC] Like its war film inspirations, *The Great Escape* involves a daily routine enforced by its antagonists.

***The Great Escape* artwork © Bob Wakelin**
You can buy prints of *The Great Escape* and Bob's other work by visiting etsy.com/uk/shop/bobwakelinartwork



"In Shadowfire, you controlled all of the characters at once, but you guided them more in Where Time Stood Still, and you flicked from one to another"

John Heap



» [ZX Spectrum] The icon-driven object management in *Where Time Stood Still* was influenced by Denton Designs' *Shadowfire*.

» [ZX Spectrum] *The Great Escape*'s isometrics took the 3D perspective in Denton Design's *Enigma Force* a step further.

▶ than-life hero, its protagonist was anonymous, and identical to his fellow prisoners. "He didn't have a name or a rank; there was no narrative like that," John confirms. "I felt that helped the idea that you were a prisoner. Also, the way I coded the other prisoners was very similar, so they all moved around in exactly the same way."

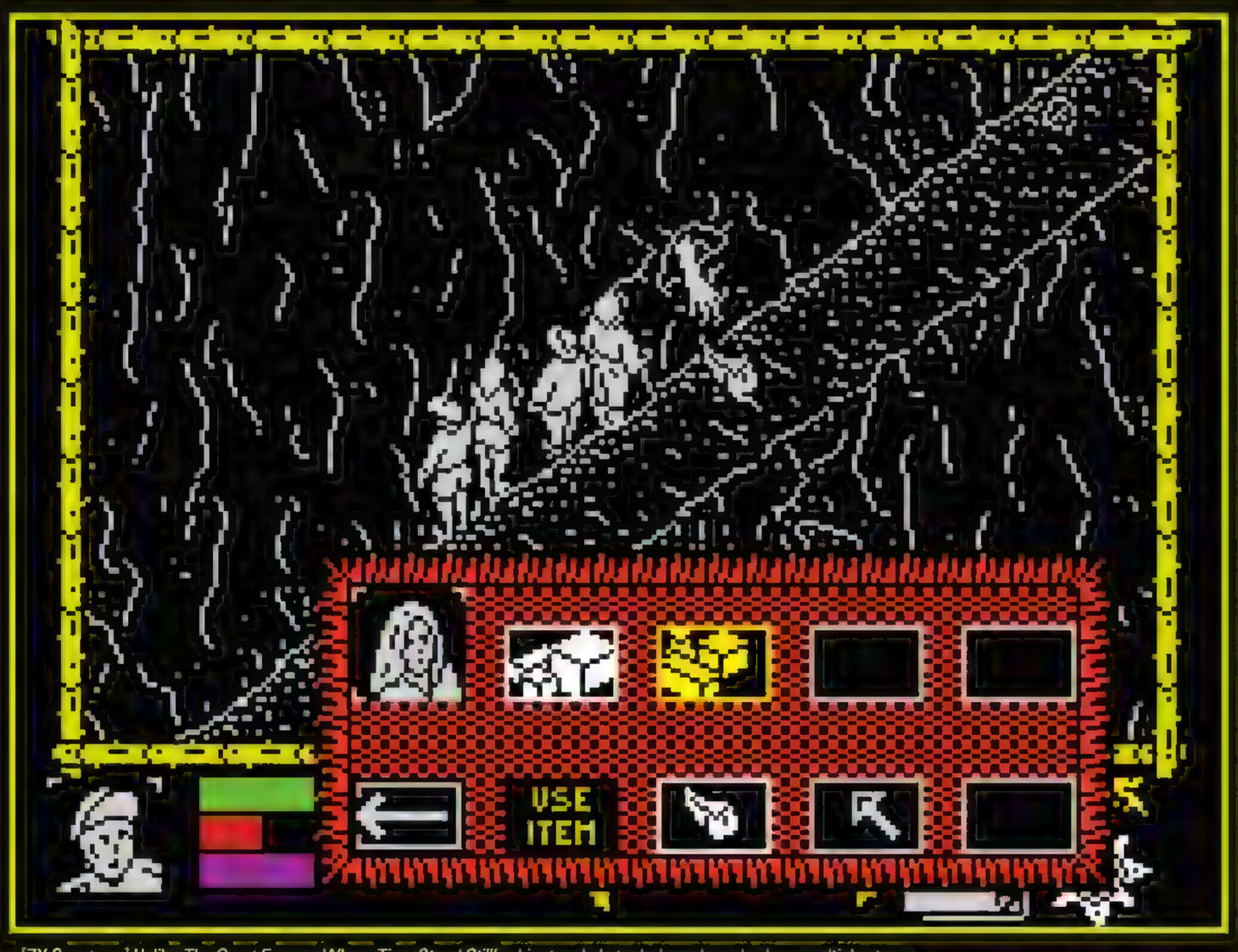
As well as its unnamed player character, the design John was implementing also distinguished itself by depicting its hero's morale with a flag rather than representing his energy with a traditional meter. "Morale was important, because if you didn't have any then you weren't going to try to escape," John reasons. "The flag was in the original design, with it going up and down with your morale. I couldn't fill the whole screen with the game, and the flag just helped to fill that out."

A further differentiation followed that took 'idle animations' to their extremes, as John coded *The Great Escape* to walk its unnamed prisoner through a daily routine if left unattended by the player. "I assumed beginners would wander around aimlessly," John contemplates, "so I was trying to get the prison routine in and let them understand what was going on. If they missed roll call that was an issue, so they needed to know where those sorts of things happened. I also thought it was nice that it was an act of will to come out of the norm and try to escape."

Additional mechanics referenced previous games that John had worked on, including the object confiscation in his Denton Designs debut, although the items in *The Great Escape* could also be hidden. "In *Shadowfire*, if you shot enemies their objects would drop to the floor, and you would be able to get them," John ponders. "I think the object mechanics in *The Great Escape* were maybe an extension of that, and I think hiding the objects was just a development of that idea, where I wanted to do one thing, and then I thought about what else I could do with it."

Besides evolutions, *The Great Escape*'s design also contained innovations, and its greatest change took the form of a system that allowed players to devise unique escape plans by choosing which challenges to overcome with which items. "What I liked to do was create the environment and make it rule-based, so everything happened for a reason, and then let people find their own way," John recollects. "In those days, people used to draw maps and loved exploring, and because *The Great Escape* was rule-based there were several ways out, although I might not have thought of all of them."

The freedom to mount all sorts of escape attempts from John's isometric debut ensured brisk sales for *The Great Escape* on its release, and a request for more from its publisher. "We



» [ZX Spectrum] Unlike *The Great Escape*, *Where Time Stood Still*'s object and obstacle-based puzzles have multiple steps.

» [Atari ST] *Where Time Stood Still*'s menu-based mechanics build on earlier Denton Design games like *Enigma Force*.

»[ZX Spectrum] *Where Time Stood Still*'s character management can be traced back to John Heap's first game *Alien*.

had a meeting with David Ward, and *The Great Escape* had done very well, so he was happy to publish whatever we wanted to do," John beams. "I said I fancied doing something on the Spectrum 128, and he said to come up with a design. So I went away, and I just went mad! I had multiple pieces of A3 graph paper stuck on the wall, and I drew this massive world."

Rather than devising a direct sequel to *The Great Escape*, however, John set his sprawling follow-up in a hidden land where dinosaurs roamed, rather than another POW camp. "*The Great Escape* was very flat; there weren't any hills in it – *Where Time Stood Still* had height," John says of his second isometric design, "but it was also more open, so the atmosphere wasn't so concentrated, and of course it had a 'lost world' theme. I was always interested in adventure tales and derring-do, so the theme probably came from there. It was a bit cliched, really, a plane crashing in a land and you had to escape, but it was fine for a computer game."

But *Where Time Stood Still*'s high-adventure plot wasn't entirely original, in fact, it took its lead from the Seventies cult classic movie *The Land That Time Forgot*. "There was a film called something very similar," John acknowledges, "so it was a bit of a cheeky one again! That was David Ward, we had been calling it '*Tibet*'. The film was a great inspiration, but there wasn't a licence. Ocean *did* use licences all of the time, but Denton's products were in a different category."

However, one aspect of John's latest project looked to a pre-Denton product for inspiration, more specifically its survival-horror rescue mission element. "There was something similar when I did *Alien*, where you had to escape and then you had to go back and get the cat," John recalls. "It was a little bit like that in *Where Time Stood* still, but it was working together as a team to try to get everybody out."

Like *Alien*, *Where Time Stood Still* had a group of characters to manage, and unlike *The Great Escape*, the follow-up's heroes had unique personalities and appearances. "Because it was on the Spectrum 128 it had more memory, so the characters could have different sprites," John points out. "I wanted to develop them as well, so I was trying to make them a little bit more realistic. People were playing these games for a long time, and they needed to identify with the characters or else they wouldn't care if they died."

Instead of one-hit deaths or energy bars, John expanded on *The Great Escape*'s morale system by incorporating maintenance mechanics into his sequel, where skills required to tackle challenges could be secured by keeping characters fed, happy and motivated. "Each character had certain characteristics that were useful," John explains. "You would have to get Gloria to drop her compact so you could get across the river, and Dirk – Gloria's husband – could speak to the natives. But messages would pop-up from the characters telling you they were hungry and so on, and they would quite often wander off."

In order to limit the amount of 'character herding' in his second isometric adventure, John built on his first three published games with a character control mechanism to guide team members not under the player's control. "*Where Time Stood Still* was different, although I had a little bit of character management in *Alien*, *Shadowfire* and *Enigma Force*," John reflects. "In *Shadowfire*, you controlled all of the

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: Character Building

From anonymous POW, to ensemble cast, to starship crew

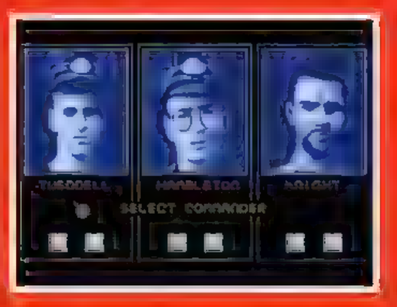
THE GREAT ESCAPE

His name and rank are never revealed, but the morale of *The Great Escape*'s prisoner is vitally important. His spirits are initially high, but getting caught out of bounds or in possession of items rapidly drains his motivation to escape. His optimism is renewed by finding items required to overcome challenges.

WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

If you don't keep *Where Time Stood Still*'s player characters motivated by making progress they can wander off and meet a grim fate. If you don't keep them fed, hydrated and well-rested they can die. Essentially, this makes finding food and water, and resting, as important as surviving the game's scenarios.

WRECKERS



A crew of three mans *Wreckers* space station, but only one can be brought out of suspended animation at a time, and if they get injured or exhausted they need to be returned to a cryogenic chamber to recuperate. Similarly, the game's droids have to visit a recharge unit or a medic droid if they're damaged.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: Multiple Choice

How devising escape plans led to frantic multitasking

THE GREAT ESCAPE

1

Although *The Great Escape* doesn't depict a truly open world, it does let you attempt various forms of escape from its POW camp. Basically, there are multiple ways of overcoming the game's challenges – for example, you can unlock doors using keys or by picking locks, and tunnel under fences or cut through them with wirecutters.

WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

2

Like *The Great Escape*, *Where Time Stood Still* lets you choose how to escape its game world, but it drops you in a far bigger, more open environment. This means you have to choose your route as well as select items to get past obstacles and hazards. You also have to decide which character to trust with each object.

WRECKERS

3

Rather than multiple escape routes reached by solving object and obstacle-based problems, *Wreckers* overloads you with challenges. Giant bulbs have to be kept cool and aligned or the game's space station blows up, aliens have to be dispatched using a range of methods and essential systems have to be maintained.

[Atari ST] *Wreckers'* heroes are armed, like *Where Time Stood Still's*, but fights are more frequent in the follow-up.

[Amiga] You manage *Wreckers'* droids rather than controlling them directly, unlike *Enigma Force's* heroes.

characters at once, but you *guided* them more in *Where Time Stood Still*, and you flicked from one to another, with the rest following and trying to keep up."

Another callback followed, in the form of *Where Time Stood Still*'s menu-driven object manipulation, which reworked aspects of the game that John had first worked on at Denton Designs. "*Shadowfire* had menus with an inventory, and you clicked on things and then clicked your inventory to pick them up," John observes, "I think the object interaction in *Where Time Stood Still* was a development from that. But obviously it had windows, because it wasn't *just* a menu game. That made it more complicated to play, and perhaps that was a mistake."

The sheer ambition of *Where Time Stood Still* also caused complications for its designer, as he one-upped *The Great Escape* by devising bespoke gameplay for its successor. "There were scenarios, like when you went to the first pygmy village," John muses. "You gave them Gloria's compact and they gave you a piece of meat that you could feed to a creature later on. So that was the scenario, and when you walked into it you would trigger it. I had several of those to write, and it just took a *long* time."

The complexity of John's second isometric title delayed its release until almost two years after his first, and although *Where Time Stood Still* reviewed well, it wasn't profitable. John responded with a streamlined isometric design set in deep space. "The design was meant for someone else to write, but I ended up taking it over," John says of *Wreckers*. "Maybe it was

» [PC] Rather than escaping, the ultimate goal in *Wreckers* is to attain the rank of Air Marshal.

"The spaceship was a closed environment. And where the previous games were escaping from the game world, Wreckers was defending it from obliteration"

John Heap

a response to the openness of *Where Time Stood Still*, because the spaceship was a closed environment. And where the previous games were about escaping from the game world, *Wreckers* was defending it from obliteration."

A second deviation from John's previous isometric efforts saw *Wreckers* focus on crisis management and real-time strategy instead of obstacle-based challenges. "It was a more simple design, but there were quite a lot of things that needed to be done, so it was all about spinning plates," John assesses. "It was probably moving back towards *Shadowfire* and *Enigma Force*, because *Wreckers* was very similar in many ways. It was a strategy game where everything happened in real-time, so it was going back to things that interested me."

But *Wreckers*' design also built on John's previous isometric game, especially with its resource management, which took *Where Time Stood Still*'s character skillset mechanics to another level. "The characters were like your resources," John argues, "you had three humans, and you could go to a map where you could control droids – three to begin with, but you could make more. When your human characters started to get ill they would get better when you put them back into suspended animation, and building droids was useful, because they would shoot the aliens."

Unlike *Where Time Stood Still*, however, John stopped short of giving players direct control of all of *Wreckers*' protagonists, and instead made its droids deployable but autonomous. "One thing that had upset me in *Enigma Force* was that there was a 'brain' icon that allowed you to control characters via a joystick instead of icons and commands," John says of the *Shadowfire* sequel. "That meant that players could just run all the way through shooting things until they had discovered everything. I felt that took away from the strategy side of it, so I intentionally didn't allow players to control the droids in *Wreckers*."

As with *Where Time Stood Still*, John's innovative real-time strategy follow-up *Wreckers* took a little less than two years to complete, with many reviewers praising it on release, although its developer had reservations. "I thought the design was flawed in several ways," John reckons. "One of them was the shooting, it was really difficult in an isometric view, because you had to shoot along certain angles. Also, there weren't really any 'objects'. Perhaps I was feeling that 'pick this up and drop that' was something games had moved on from."

In reviewing the journey that started with *The Great Escape* in 1986 and ended with *Wreckers* in 1991, John notes that he planned a fourth isometric adventure before offering a succinct explanation for why his innovative series remained a trilogy. "I did start a fantastic isometric game for Infogrames, called *New Moon*," John reveals to us. "It was a political intrigue strategy game, where the player was a video journalist. You could debate with non-player characters, and convince them of things, and we had cityscapes that you could walk around. But we did the sums and it wasn't going to be viable – I think isometric adventures had just run their natural course." ★

» [Amiga] Fallen crew members merge with aliens to produce hybrids in *Wreckers*, like the game's movie inspiration *Alien*.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: Forward Planning

How lateral thinking evolved into tactical strategising

THE GREAT ESCAPE

■ Since *The Great Escape*'s hero loses any objects that he's carrying if he gets apprehended by camp guards, it's essential that you find hiding places for items in advance of securing them. It also pays to work out the guards patrol routes, because if you can avoid their line of sight then they won't detain you.

WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

■ You don't have to hide items in *Where Time Stood Still*, but you need to plan ahead. Because each character has unique skills, you have to take care to keep them all alive, as future scenarios could prove difficult without their specialist input. Rationing food is also important, as characters can have full health and continue to eat.

WRECKERS

■ Advance planning ties together many of *Wreckers*' mechanics. Your crew members initially have low ranks, but they get promoted for bravery. This enables them to build better droids with different skills, but better models take longer to construct, so you have to constantly think ahead to what might serve you best later.

Hardware Heaven

Game Boy Color

» **MANUFACTURER:** Nintendo » **YEAR:** 1998
» **COST:** £69.99 (launch), £50+ (today, boxed), £25+ (today, unboxed)

Nine years into its life, the Game Boy was the undisputed king of handhelds – but it was also looking a little long in the tooth, especially as the technology wasn't exactly cutting edge in 1989. As a result, Nintendo issued a modest upgrade to the existing hardware to extend the life of the range. The Game Boy Color was backwards compatible with its predecessors, and cosmetically similar to them, too – a little larger than the Game Boy Pocket, with a bulging back to accommodate the battery compartment. The machine came in a variety of colours to highlight its key selling point, a non-backlit colour display.

The choice of display meant that Nintendo was able to retain the long battery life that players expected, while offering an upgrade with tangible benefits. To cope with the extra workload and allow for more sophisticated games, Nintendo upgraded the CPU speed and added extra RAM, though developers could opt to avoid these in order to make their games compatible with older black-and-white hardware. An infrared port was also added for short-term communication features, though it was rarely used. The system was a roaring success, and its short-notice announcement wrong-footed Bandai and SNK, both of which were preparing monochrome competitors. ★

Game Boy Color fact

■ Some original Game Boy games have special custom palettes when used with a Game Boy Color. Examples include *Metroid II: Return Of Samus*, *Donkey Kong*, *Space Invaders* and *Kirby's Dream Land*.

ESSENTIAL GAME
Pokémon Gold & Silver

While you might be tempted to dismiss it as something you're 'too old for', the second major *Pokémon* release is a towering achievement on Nintendo's handheld. The game is a sprawling RPG with real mechanical depth, and a huge amount of content – as well as the new Johto region, you can go back and explore Kanto from *Red & Blue*, so it offers plenty to see and do before you even think about trying to fill out your Pokédex. You might need to replace the cartridge battery to get the real-time clock working these days, but it will be worth it.

ULTIMATE GUIDE: DRAGON SPIRIT

If there's one thing that centuries of fantastical fiction has taught us, it's that massive fire-breathing reptiles are incredibly cool. Join **Retro Gamer** as we look at an arcade game from 1987 that lets you take the reins of one of these powerful beasts

Words by Graeme Mason

» [Arcade] Even in death, some enemies, such as these swooping birds, pose a threat with their deadly feathers.

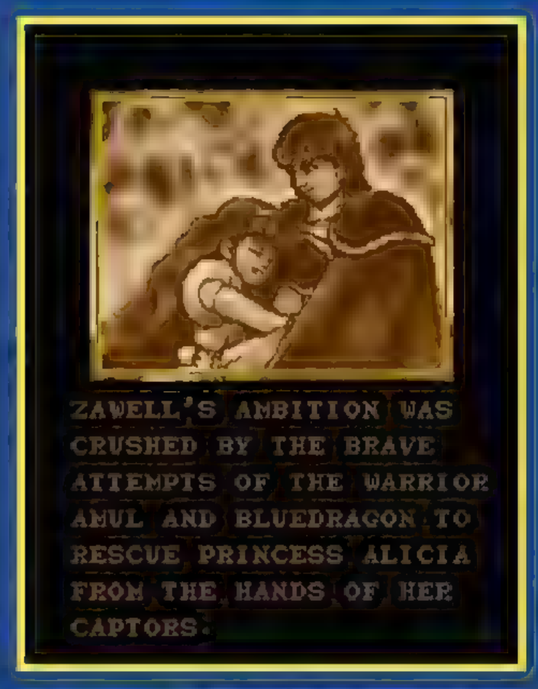
» [Arcade] In this dastardly dark cavern, there's little visibility, even with a power-up.

After the success of Namco's horizontally scrolling shoot-'em-up *Xevious*, a range of spaceship-themed games predictably flooded the arcade market. Eventually, Namco itself was inspired enough to create something that combined the gameplay ethic of its previous hit with the fantasy genre that was fashionable following the phenomenal popularity of Atari's dungeon-delver *Gauntlet*. The result, even by arcade standards, is a videogame of incredible, almost perverse difficulty, despite its ostensibly powerful protagonist.

» [Arcade] Ground dinosaurs, like all enemies, fire constantly at the dragon.

As with *Xevious*, *Dragon Spirit* takes place over two planes of action as the draconic hero faces off against enemies both on the ground and in the air. Across the sky, the flying lizard shoots lethal fire, while a similar attack drops to the land below, with a much more limited range. Set in the Palaeozoic era, most of the enemies are dinosaurs of some description, mixed in with fantastical creatures such as flaming phoenixes, mutated peacock-like birds and huge carnivorous plants. These are either land or air-based with some despicable creatures (such as giant bats) acting as a combination of both, lying in wait for an innocent dragon to approach before launching themselves into the air, fangs bared.

Dragon Spirit is the story of Amul, a prince who can summon lightning with his magical sword, transforming him into a giant blue dragon – a useful ability given the wicked demon Zawell has kidnapped his girlfriend and taken her to its hidden lair. Transformed into the eponymous fire-breathing creature, Amul must cross nine stages laden not only with the deadly local flora and fauna, but also the minions of Zawell itself, which is keen to hold on to its female captive. Fast and powerful, Amul moves gracefully across each level, but there's so much opposition that it'll take more than reflexes to win his love back. Fortunately, two, or even three, heads are better than one, and by picking up the blue dragon head orbs (released when Amul destroys a blue egg), our hero can grow a maximum of three fire-spitting bonces. While this has the unfortunate side-effect of increasing the dragon's size, and thus the chances of you getting hit, the ability to wield crimson destruction as a multiheaded Amul is hard to ignore. With the dragon able to absorb just two hits before losing a life, this beastie needs all the help he can get.



» [Arcade] Mission accomplished and the princess is back in your arms.

KOPTERA

GRAIA

BOSS RUSH

GOLD PTERADON

DEADLY PEACOCK

FANTASTIC BEASTS AND HOW TO SLAY THEM

LEVEL ONE: PLESIOSAUR

Rising from the depths of the ocean, this seafaring monster spits fire at the player while zigzagging across the screen. Only its head is vulnerable to attack.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Its fireballs are slow and can be easily dodged, so it's just a matter of waiting for the right moment to launch a volley of fire against the head.

LEVEL TWO: PHOENIX

Things are heating up now, as this massive phoenix rises to assault the dragon. Protected by two rotating rings of fireballs, this boss makes the frying pan look an enticing prospect.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Watch the pattern of fireballs as they rotate in two separate circles. Forget about trying to eliminate them, just dodge and focus on the phoenix.

LEVEL THREE: GRIATHRIOUS

This alien-like plant doesn't move, instead launching brown poisonous spores at the player. Its perimeter is marked with a series of pods, which are its vulnerable spots.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Don't bother with the main creature, instead focus on the pods, which can only be bombed, making this a battle in combining both forms of fire.

FIRE ORB

LEVEL FOUR: DEATH GUARDIAN

The flying skeletal lord of level four hovers above Amul, throwing down slivers of fire. In this form it is invulnerable, with the glowing blue orb weak point at its centre well protected.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

When it shatters, keep to the bottom of the screen and assault the exposed beating blue heart. After the third or fourth attempt, it should break.

LEVEL FIVE: GIANT SPIDER

Not one for arachnophobes, this gigantic spider spawns multiple smaller eight-legged freaks across its large web, and its six glowing eyes are the stuff of nightmares.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

You'll have to get up close here as the spider can only be hit with the ground weapon. Try and take out the smaller spiders before mounting an assault.

LEVEL SIX: GUBIRA

Similar to level one's aquatic dinosaur creature, this snake-like leviathan also rises from deep within the sea. Its head spits fire at the player, so you best attempt some evasive manoeuvres!

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Sweep across the screen, luring the monster up, before sweeping back and firing at the head as you pass. Don't take too long, though.

AMUL

PHOENIX

LEVEL SEVEN: SEA DEVIL

Resembling some form of mutated angler fish from the deep, this green soggy menace is flanked by a circle of smaller fishy friends and spits a tirade of fiery globs.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Its pals are easily destroyed, but the sheer amount of fire makes this boss a tricky customer. Try to flank it while nipping in between the volleys.

LEVEL EIGHT: GUARD PORTAL

This boss is an unusual one, in that it also serves as the entrance to the next level. It's still a deadly encounter to overcome, however, with the portal shooting strips of fire bolts at the player.

HOW TO BEAT IT:

Defeat the mass of homing enemies by zigzagging up and down the screen. There's no need for bombing, fortunately.

LEVEL NINE: ZAWELL

There's a three-headed dragon sub-boss before Amul faces off against the demonic Zawell, whose design is pretty similar to the first and sixth level bosses.

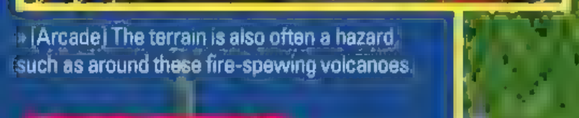
HOW TO BEAT IT:

This is a relatively simple fight. Circle around Zawell, avoiding his homing fire and let loose when you are right underneath it. Job done – easy, eh?

POWER-UP ORB

KILLER PLANT

» [Arcade] Huge sea beasts patrol the rivers.



» [Arcade] The terrain is also often a hazard, such as around these fire-spewing volcanoes.

MASTER OF FIRE

HOW TO BEST DRAGON SPIRIT

GET YOUR PROTEIN

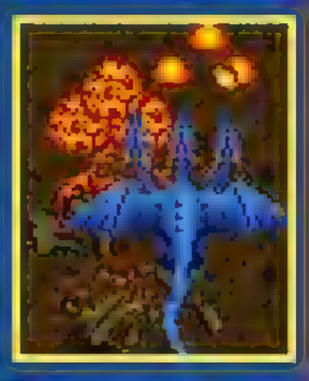
Dotted throughout *Dragon Spirit* are red and blue eggs, and these can be split open with bomb fire, setting free a valuable power-up. Given the game's high level of difficulty, it's imperative these are sought out and collected if you wish to progress.

IN A FLASH

Flashing enemies will often descend upon Amul, and taking one out releases a power-up that can be used to boost the dragon's abilities, whether it be extra shots or a useful shield. Watch out for the power-up-destroying, erm, power-up though.

DEATH FROM ABOVE (AND BELOW)

As with the illustrious predecessor *Xevious*, both ground and aerial enemies assault the player, who has a two-level fire in order to combat them. Balancing the use of both weapons is key, especially given the limited range of the ground bombs.

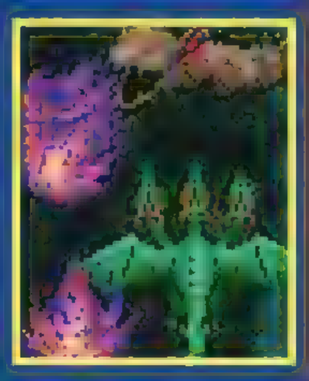


SKITTISH POWER-UPS

You know those types of power-up icons that circle around the screen, keeping up with play as they patiently wait to be collected? Well don't expect those in *Dragon Spirit*, as here they meander upwards briefly before plunging downwards. Be ready.

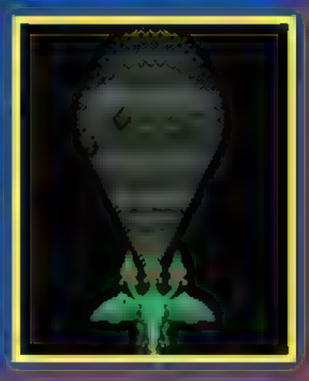
I HAVE THE POWER

Skilful manipulation of *Dragon Spirit*'s power-ups is the key to conquering this demanding game. And that doesn't just mean acquiring them, but also holding onto them, as taking just one hit will eliminate any that have been collected. Ouch.



OH, COME ON!

Stage eight of *Dragon Spirit* is the sort of experience that gives even veteran gamers nightmares. As if things weren't tricky enough, now the dragon's vision is severely restricted as it negotiates a narrow cave, with no letup in enemy assault. For once, we are lost for words. Sorry.



"I wanted the conversions to be as difficult as the original, so I played it extensively, playing each level and making notes of the attack patterns"

NEIL HARDING

Luckily, there are many more enhancements available such as red orbs that are released from smashed red eggs. Collect enough of these globes and Amul's fire becomes bigger and more potent by a further two levels, although taking a hit reduces the power down by one level. Other power-up orbs include long fire (an extended wave of fire), wide fire (an additional spread of flames that increase exponentially with each extra head) and homing fire, which, as the name suggests, sends Amul's fireballs scurrying straight towards any on-screen enemies, eliminating the need for anything as laborious as aiming. The S orb shrinks Amul, causing him to lose any extra heads, but making him much harder to hit, while the power wing protects him from all attacks for a limited time. Diamond and gold orbs increase the player's score while the skull orb must be avoided at all costs – it reduces any level of firepower the dragon possesses, and also eliminates any special abilities. Those special abilities are all obtained by killing the special flashing enemies that appear at certain points throughout the game.

Dragon Spirit is set across several distinct terrains, each with its relevant enemies and boss fights. The levels scrolls downwards, and also horizontally to a limited degree, as common for similar arcade games of the time. Stage one takes place over a fairly mundane barren and mountainous waste, before the world's budding and chaotic emergence is demonstrated in stage two's volcanic eruptions and lava flows. The dense (and lethal) undergrowth of level three gives way to open sandy dunes (stage four), dark, claustrophobic caves (five), an icy tundra (six) and the watery depths of stage seven. It's been a gauntlet from hell so far, but if you sit back and rest on your laurels then it'll be game over before you know it. For level eight of *Dragon Spirit* springs the wickedest, most devious surprise of possibly all arcade gaming ever on poor unsuspecting players.

It transpires that dragons, for all their mystical power and bombast, forgot to eat their carrots, and can't see in the dark. As the dark cavern of stage eight is stormed, all Amul can see is a short conical distance ahead of him, as if he has installed a pair of Ford Fiesta headlights on top of his head. With this stage chucking enemies and projectiles at the beast with just as much gleeful abandon as the other stages, the player is put at an almost laughable disadvantage with the only salve the addition of extended vision power-ups. It's of little consolation in this horrendously

» [Arcade] The shield is a useful, if brief power-up.

SHELLFISH

"I remember reading a letter in a games magazine where this guy was so proud and happy to have managed to complete the first level"

NEIL HARDING

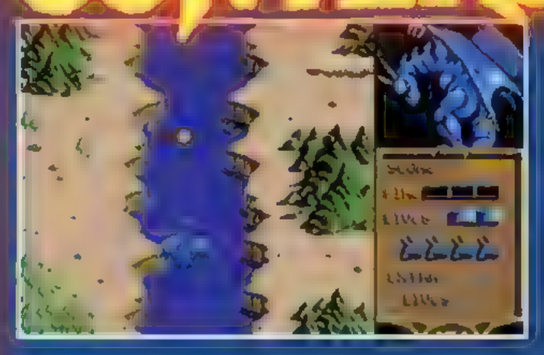
DINO

difficult segment, which concludes against a fire-spitting gate to the demon's lair. If you've made it this far, the looming, mazy and melancholy walls of Zowell's domain await you, and the very nastiest of its powerful underlings. But at least you'll be able to see where you're going, and in perhaps a nod to the overawing challenge of *Dragon Spirit*, Namco released a second version into arcades, giving the player the option of dragons and starting level, plus a slightly nimbler main character. It's little compensation, although at least your average arcade attendee could easily experience more of the game.

With publisher Namco striking a deal with Atari, *Dragon Spirit* cabinets appeared throughout the late Eighties in arcades across the United States and Europe. Housed within a standard upright cabinet, the game runs on the Namco System One board, complete with three 6809 processors and a range of custom hardware. Despite the stiff nature, it was popular, most likely due to its theme and wide range of differing graphics. Most home conversions were handled by Domark, and, with Atari unable to use its famous name in home markets, the company licensed the games from subsidiary Tengen. A notable exception is the NES port which, as is common, features many alterations to the original arcade game, enough to make it even considered by many as a semi-sequel rather than mere conversion.

Three years later, Namco itself continued the story with a true arcade sequel called *Dragon Sabre*. Yet the original *Dragon Spirit*, with its beautiful and diverse visual style remains a true test to even the most seasoned of gamers, a potent song of fire for anyone willing to take on its demanding prehistoric world. ★

CONVERSION CAPERS

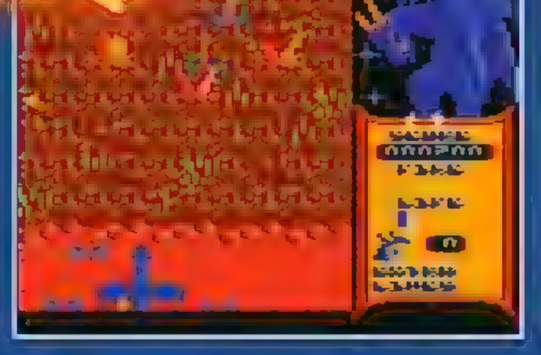


ATARI ST

This plays similarly to the Amiga version and at least replicates the exciting display of the arcade game, although the game's music is absent save for a nice title ditty. Competent rather than amazing, it's disappointing a little more wasn't done with this 16-bit *Dragon Spirit*, although the levels are faithfully represented, save the missing cavern level.

AMIGA

The combined fire button makes a refreshing change here, in a game that could certainly use a little help in the difficulty stakes. The display is different from the other ports, with the status bar housed at the bottom of the screen, along with a nice dragon that unhelpfully obscures some of the action. Ultimately, it's a port of the ST game.



AMSTRAD CPC

The colourful display of this 8-bit conversion is certainly eye-catching, even if it plays a little choppily. The main issue is the size of the player's dragon which appears even bigger (relatively speaking) than in the arcade original, making this Amstrad game quite onerous to play. As with most of the home versions, the dark cavern stage is missing.

ZX SPECTRUM

How do you take an arduous game and make it even harder? What about changing the display to two colours, making the many projectiles even harder to see? Yet despite the frustrating difficulty, technically this is a good conversion that at least looks good and moves smoothly, although the infamous dark level is (mercifully, some would say) absent.

COMMODORE 64

With quality shmups common on the Commodore computer, Domark needed something special to impress fans. Alas, dismal graphics and the cursed invisible bullet syndrome reduce this to a bit of a mess and the poorest of the 8-bit conversions. It is also lacking the night level – something its designers likely thought no one would notice.

PC ENGINE

Apart from the sudden blistering pace of the player's dragon, this port is a near-perfect conversion – until level seven rears its head, that is. At this point, gone are the underwater and dark levels, replaced by a nondescript castle backdrop that evokes the final level. The new level is a mite easier than the original game, but it's still brutal.

SHARP X68000

This is a lovely conversion of *Dragon Spirit*, complete with its catchy tunes, fine graphics and a slightly easier learning curve, assisted with a wider screen. Amul is much smaller and nippier, and even the dark cavern level is present. The player is also given the choice of either the first or second arcade versions, enabling easy exploration of later levels.

NES

Released three years after *Dragon Spirit* first debuted in arcades, *A New Legend* is a half-hearted attempt at a semi-sequel. While it goes to great lengths to engage the player more with cutscenes and background story, the game design is essentially the same as the original, with inferior graphics and a much more even level of difficulty.

DEVELOPER Q&A

NEIL HARDING

WE CHAT TO ONE OF THE DEVELOPERS BEHIND THE ATARI ST AND AMIGA PORTS OF DRAGON SPIRIT

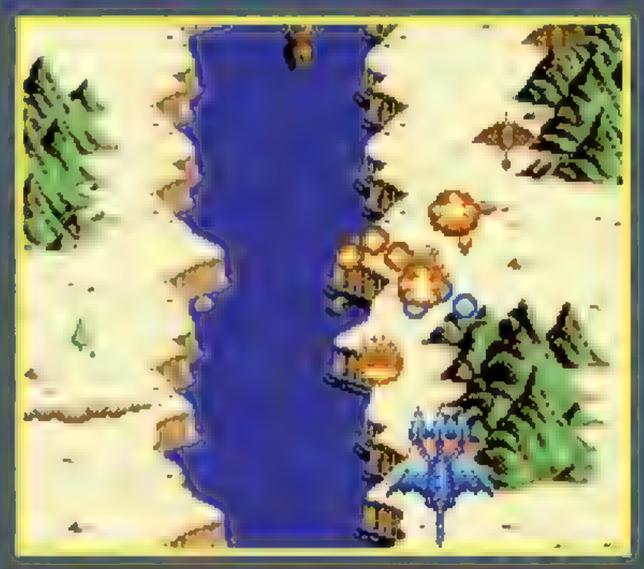
Were you aware of the arcade game, and what did you think of it?
No, not before we began, but we got an arcade machine installed in the office, so I soon played it to completion. I had to use free credit mode and a lot of continues to reach the end. I wanted the conversions to be as difficult as the original, so I played it extensively, playing each level and making notes of the attack patterns the enemies would use, as well as the locations of the power-ups.

Where were you working from?
At the time I was working for Consult Software, who were working closely with Domark. I had previously worked on *Vindicators* for Domark while at Consult, and I later worked for them directly as part of the Kremlin. David Howcroft did the graphics, and I was pleased with them, they matched pretty well.

Was the Amiga version a port of the Atari ST game?
Yes, it used mostly the same code, but took advantage of the smooth scrolling and the blitter, and used its hardware sprites to display the dragon that was part of the status panel. I think the only sacrifice I had to make was a dark cave-type level that used overlays in the arcade hardware. I couldn't emulate that efficiently enough on the ST or Amiga. And the reduced width of the Atari version because, with no hardware scrolling, I could make it run faster by reducing the game area. There's also no button for bomb, the joystick fire does both [functions] as I wanted it to be fully playable without having to use the keyboard.

It's a tough game and contains eight varied levels – which was the hardest to play in order to replicate?
The hardest level to complete was the dungeon as you had to navigate the maze as well as fight the enemies. There are patterns you can learn to avoid the projectiles fired by the enemies, you could move to a corner so all the shots come to you, then move to a new location, and so on. I think I had a limit of 96 shots on-screen at one time, plus the enemies.

Were you happy with the end product, and do you think you nailed the difficulty?
I would have liked to have got that lighting effect working in the cave level, but overall I was fairly happy with the game. And it was certainly one of the hardest games to play that I've done, I remember reading a letter in a games magazine where this guy was so proud and happy to have managed to complete the first level. I thought, 'He's going to struggle on the remaining levels, then!'



» PUSHING THE LIMITS

Panorama Cotton

One of the Mega Drive's more expensive games is also its most impressive stab at the 3D rail shooter

» **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE » **RELEASED:** 1994 » **DEVELOPER:** SUCCESS

Sometimes, it's quite hard to know the motivation behind a particular release. A few years after the cute witch Cotton was introduced in her first horizontally scrolling shoot-'em-up, Success decided to bring her to the big 16-bit consoles. The Super Nintendo got a game that was similar to the arcade original, but the Mega Drive got something completely different – a 3D shoot-'em-up using scaling sprites, similar to games like *Space Harrier*. It's an odd choice, given the Mega Drive's struggles with previous 3D shooters and the system's lack of popularity in Japan, but the developers went for it. It's a good thing they did, too, as *Panorama Cotton* is a technical showcase for Sega's console.

The 3D pseudo-scaling technique was used by many earlier Mega Drive games, typically those based on Sega's popular arcade games, including conversions such as *After Burner II* and sequels like *Super Thunder Blade*. However, *Panorama Cotton* blows all of those earlier games away – with a few years of extra programming knowledge, Success was able to convey the effect with greater speed and smoothness than its predecessors. It isn't quite arcade quality, but it was the closest you'd get on the Mega Drive.

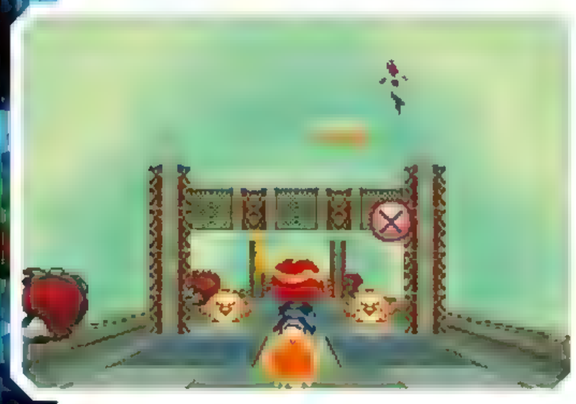
Though the technical mastery is mostly used to provide memorable graphical setpieces, like the spectacular plunge over a waterfall during the opening stage, it does also offer some interesting game design possibilities. Most notably, it's possible to shift onto upper and lower paths off the main route, which both looks great and provides depth. Of course, the game doesn't lack replay value as it's a rather stiff challenge at times.

Unfortunately, late Japanese Mega Drive releases tend to be rare and expensive, especially exclusives like *Panorama Cotton*. The last copy we saw sold for over £330, and if you want the exclusive bonus tea cup that was packaged with some copies of the game, that's more like £650. The Dreamcast sequel *Rainbow Cotton* offers similar into-the-screen action, but it's a poor alternative as it's also expensive and offers little in the way of challenge. So there's a very steep price to pay for excellence, but there really is nothing else quite like it on the Mega Drive.

HOW IT PUSHED THE LIMITS...

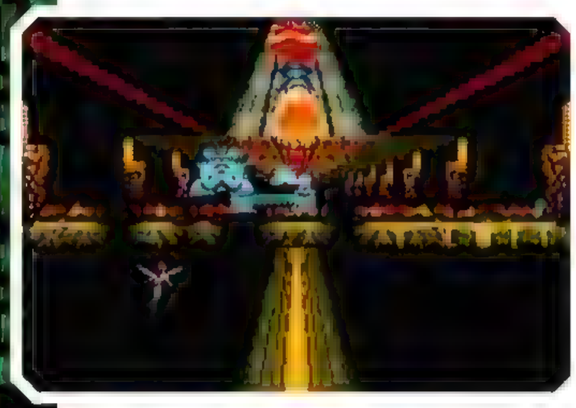
Subtle Shading

The Mega Drive struggles with colour compared to competing consoles, but *Panorama Cotton* creates the illusion of fine shading with some subtle dithering and well-chosen palettes that make excellent use of what's available.



Super Scaling

Without dedicated sprite scaling hardware, the Mega Drive struggles with games like this. *Panorama Cotton* packs in enough different levels of detail for each sprite to put most of its competitors on the system to shame.



Double Deckers

The use of road layers both above and below the action is cool, but what's really amazing is the way that the game offers off-ramps that take you to new areas, dramatically increasing the perception that you're in a 3D space.

Enemies Everywhere

While the game does sometimes slow down to accommodate them, the number of enemies on-screen can be incredibly impressive. It can be hard to believe how many sprites the system throws around.

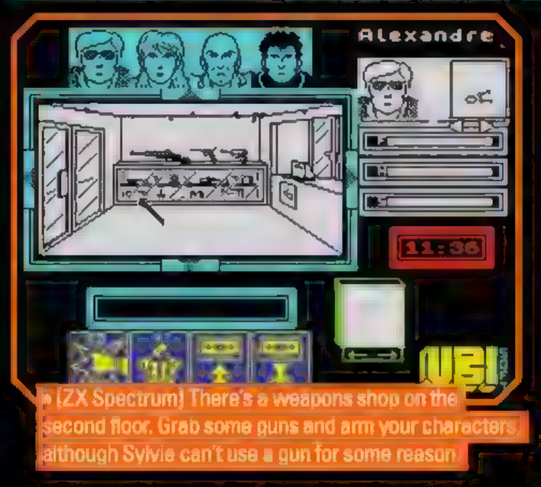
Minority Report

INTERESTING GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED

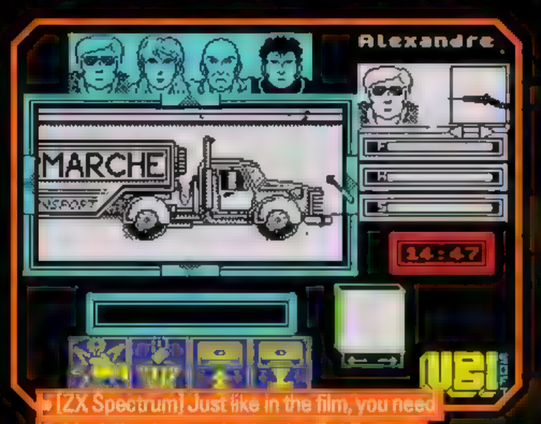
ZX SPECTRUM

If you're raiding the Spectrum back catalogue thanks to the introduction of the Next, don't just return to the classics. There are loads of lesser known games and hidden gems that are worthy of discovery

Words by Martyn Carroll



▶ [ZX Spectrum] There's a weapons shop on the second floor. Grab some guns and arm your characters, although Sylvie can't use a gun for some reason



▶ [ZX Spectrum] Just like in the film, you need to block the doors using trucks. But first you need to find the key for each truck

ZOMBI

DEVELOPER: UBISOFT ■ YEAR: 1990

Being based on George Romero's 1978 zombie opus *Dawn Of The Dead* (which was released as *Zombi* in several European countries), this game would be a perfect candidate for a Licence To Thrill feature... except it wasn't an official adaptation of the film. For its debut release, fledgling French studio Ubisoft borrowed the survivors-holed-up-in-a-shopping-mall scenario and used it as the grounds for a gripping adventure game.

What's brazen about *Zombi* is how faithfully it follows the film, beginning with the four survivors landing their helicopter on the roof of an abandoned mall. The characters' names have been changed, but what they have to do to survive – clear zombies from inside the shopping centre while scavenging for supplies, park trucks outside the doors to prevent more zombies entering, fight off the looters (or 'punks') who break into the mall, and finally escape in the refuelled chopper – is almost identical to the film.

Zombi features an icon-driven interface that's not unlike the *Shadowfire* games. There are around 90 rooms in the mall, spread across six floors, and you navigate them by clicking the on-screen directional arrows. When you encounter a zombie, you defeat it by clicking the pointer on its head several times (the equivalent of bashing its brains in). Your first port of call should be the weapon shop where you can grab some guns which makes easy work of the undead. In other locations you'll find essential supplies like food and first aid kits, as well as keys, fuses, a fuel can and other items you need to advance through the game. If one of the characters loses too much health and dies, you can switch to another, but beware that only Alexandre can fly the chopper, so you'll want to keep 'Flyboy' away from brain-bashing duties.

The game was originally developed for the Amstrad CPC, with separate versions for 64K and 128K machines (the latter benefited from more detailed location graphics). Sadly, the Spectrum version was developed for the standard 48K machine with no 128K embellishments. Ironically, programmer Geoff Phillips has since revealed that Ubisoft specifically asked him for a 48K version, and he spent ages optimising the graphics to fit into memory, only for the packaging to wrongly state that it would only work on 128K machines! That mistake may have affected

sales, but there was a bigger reason why the game underperformed. The original was released in 1986, yet the Spectrum version didn't arrive until 1990, by which time icon-driven adventures were looking a little stale. It was also based on a movie that, despite its growing cult status, was 12 years old at the time and featured zombies wearing flared trousers. We wanted games based on *RoboCop* and *Batman* movies back then.

Zombi is an overlooked classic that's worth seeking out, particularly if you're playing on a Spectrum Next as you can plug in a PS/2 mouse and use that to play the game – you'll just need to search the web for the modded version that supports mouse control.

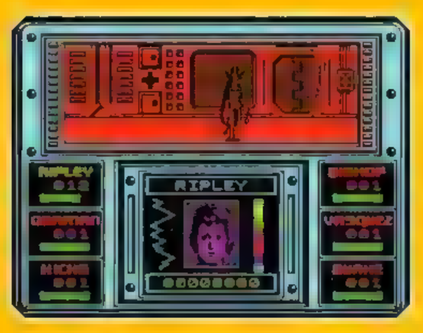
[ZX Spectrum] One of the puzzles involves venturing into the mall's gloomy basement and fixing the fuse box.

IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...

ENIGMA FORCE

COMMODORE 64, ZX SPECTRUM

■ The sequel to *Shadowfire* retains the icon-driven interface but introduces the 'Mind Probe' feature which enables players to take direct control of the characters. The result is a less strategic, more accessible game in which you explore a vast underground complex in search of the evil General Zoff.



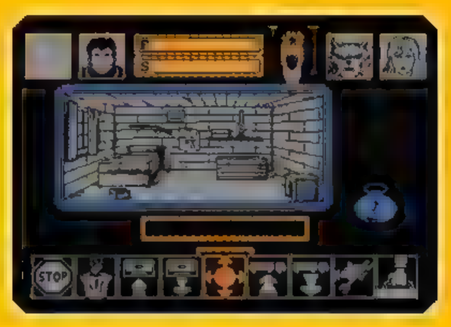
ALIENS

ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS

■ Regarded by many as the scariest 8-bit game ever made, *Aliens* faithfully recreates the scene from the movie where the marines sweep the colony on LV-426. There's a greater emphasis on action and strategy than *Zombi*, and being rushed by an alien is far scarier than encountering the walking dead.

HURLEMENTS

AMSTRAD CPC, PC



■ Fans of *Zombi* should check out this 1988 follow-up that's almost identical in style and execution, except this one's based on the 1981 werewolf movie *The Howling* (which was released in French-speaking countries as *Hurlements*). It was never translated, but it's easy to play if you're au fait with *Zombi*.

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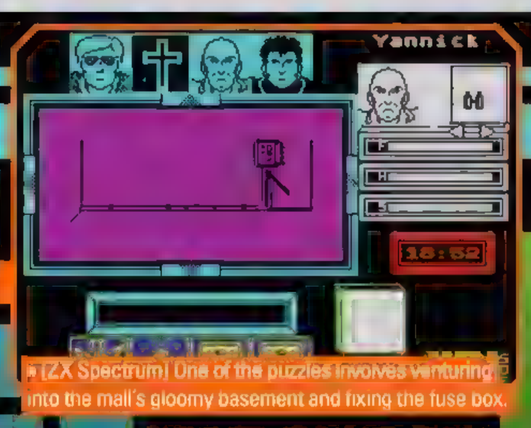
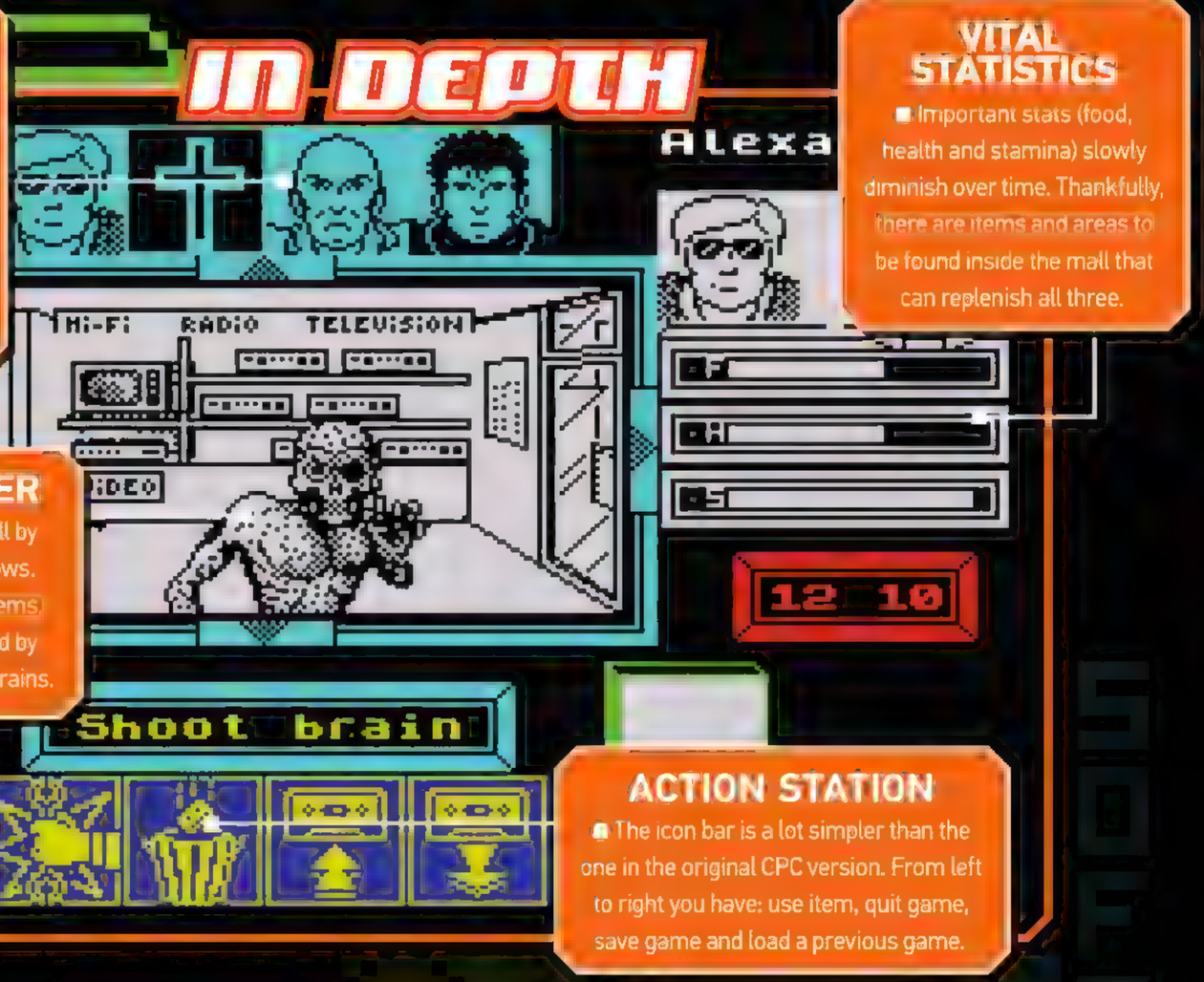


[ZX Spectrum] One of the puzzles involves venturing into the mall's gloomy basement and fixing the fuse box.

IN DEPTH



DEAD BY DAWN?

■ Click here to switch control between the four playable characters. If someone dies they don't come back to life and try to eat your face. You missed a trick there, Ubisoft!

VITAL STATISTICS

■ Important stats (food, health and stamina) slowly diminish over time. Thankfully, there are items and areas to be found inside the mall that can replenish all three.

MALL EXPLORER

■ You move around the mall by clicking the directional arrows. You can also interact with items and deal with the living dead by putting bullets though their brains.

ACTION STATION

■ The icon bar is a lot simpler than the one in the original CPC version. From left to right you have: use item, quit game, save game and load a previous game.

Minority Report

MAILSTROM

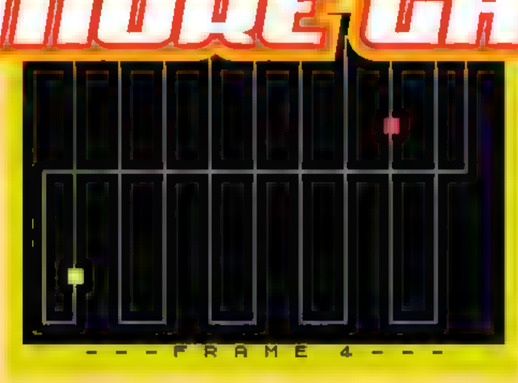
DEVELOPER: REPTILE INDUSTRIES ■ YEAR: 1986

Oh to be a fly on the wall when Reptile Industries pitched this game to Ocean. "You play a postman named Michael Nasty, who's like Postman Pat but a bit psychotic, and he has to deliver the mail in a dystopian future where thugs rule the streets, and if they get in your way you can shoot-'em-up or run-'em-down, as the mail must get through."

To give Ocean its due, it was clearly receptive to original ideas and put the game out, presumably under the assumption that *someone* might like it. Rick Robson of *Your Sinclair* magazine did, awarding the game 8/10, despite quipping that it "fails to deliver". Other critics were far more 'meh' and *Mailstrom* quickly sank without trace. Which was a shame, because there's a good little game here with some genuinely interesting ideas – if you can excuse the fiddly controls, unclear objectives and sedate pace. The snail-like speed of your post van is mind-numbing at first, until you realise that you can equip it with a 'super pursuit' turbo device that sends you whizzing along your route like KITT out of *Knight Rider* (in fact, your van is codenamed SKIT in an example of one the game's many in-jokes). Of course if you're playing under emulation, or on the Spectrum Next, you can double the processor speed and the sluggish pace becomes a moot point.

Oh to be fly on the wall when Amstrad asked Ocean for games to include on the disk to be bundled with the new Spectrum Plus 3 computer. Amstrad: "You've given us *Gift From The Gods*, *NOMAD*, *Cosmic Wartoad*, and *Daley Thompson's Super Test*. We're got room for one more game and we could do with something special." Ocean: "We've got just the thing…"

More Games To Play



» CRUISING ON BROADWAY

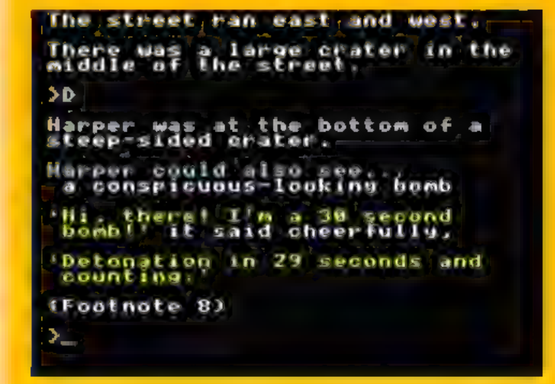
■ Any software collection needs to be peppered with titles of little substance – those games where you can have a five minute spin and move on. This early effort is a bit like *Qix* only you're locked onto the lines, that are supposed to be Manhattan streets, and have to avoid the flashing blocks, ahem, 'cops'. It's very simple and very short, with just four layouts to complete, but it's groovy as hell.

» APPLE JAM

■ Describing *Apple Jam* isn't easy. You play a chap working in a rat-infested factory where you have to catch falling apples and jam them in your mouth, otherwise they'll be scoffed by the scurrying rats who'll grow as big as cats and try to eat you. Trouble is, if you eat too much food you get fat and have to nip to the sauna to slim down. And then there's the lift that you can use to splat the rats. What the hell – just give it a go.

» MUGSY'S REVENGE

■ Set in the Prohibition era, Mugsy looks to build his empire by smuggling booze in this sequel to the novel original (which was included as a free bonus). Once again mixing strategy with arcade sequences, the sequel is a step closer to the 'interactive comic strip' that the original promised. The pool hall animation that plays at the end of each year remains one of the most impressive sequences ever seen on the Spectrum.



» RIGEL'S REVENGE

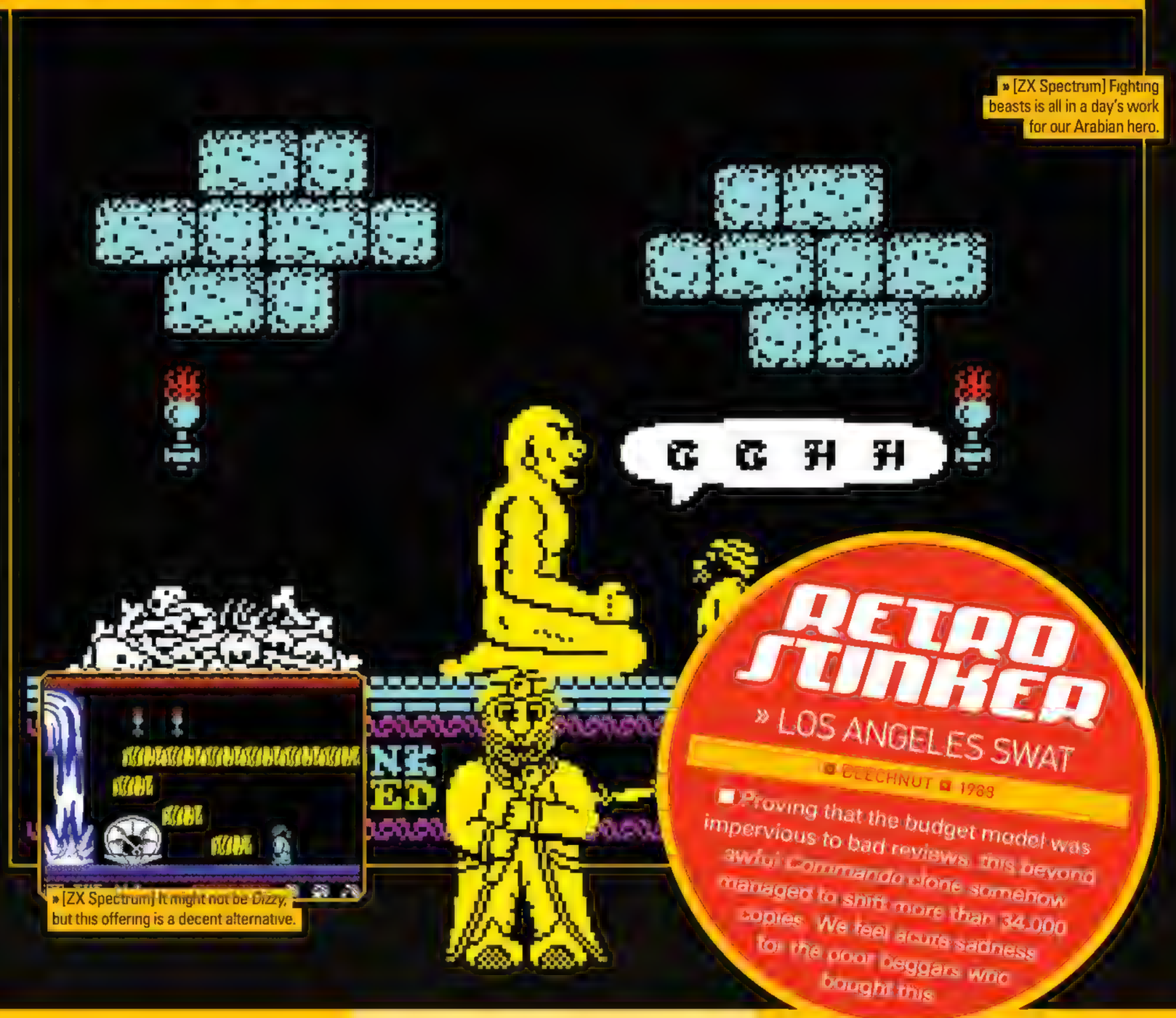
■ You could fill a book with obscure Spectrum text adventures and still not cover them all. This one deserves a special mention, for being a two-part sci-fi adventure that's simply engrossing from the word go (make sure you're paying attention during the loading sequence otherwise you won't get very far). It's very droll, too, (check out the 'footnotes') and utilises graphics in a clever way. Amazingly, this was a budget title.

SCEPTRE OF BAGDAD

DEVELOPER: PRODUCTIVE PLAYTIME ◘ YEAR: 1987

Arcade-style adventures with large sprites, no scrolling and an indifference to colour clash were a good fit for the Spectrum. The *Wally Week* and *Magic Knight* games were the most popular examples until *Dizzy* rolled in and conquered all. This £1.99 gem was released a few months prior to the first *Dizzy* game and dropped straight through the cracks, despite receiving above-average reviews (*Crash* awarded it 75% and called it "a steal"). It probably didn't help that budget game peddlers Atlantis hardly had the best track record.

Sceptre Of Bagdad definitely deserves a second chance. For a start the graphics are brilliantly colourful, and the animation of main character Caliph is surprisingly smooth and dare we say cartoon-like. It does borrow heavily from the *Wally Week* games, but if you enjoyed the oddball puzzles and overall wackiness of *Three Weeks In Paradise* and wanted a crack at something similar, this game fits the bill perfectly. Similarly, if you're revisiting the Spectrum back catalogue looking for interesting games to play on the Next then it's also highly recommended. The challenge of retrieving the staff of the title will keep you entertained, while the graphics and animation really come to life on a HD display. The only thing missing is an in-game tune.



» [ZX Spectrum] Fighting beasts is all in a day's work for our Arabian hero.

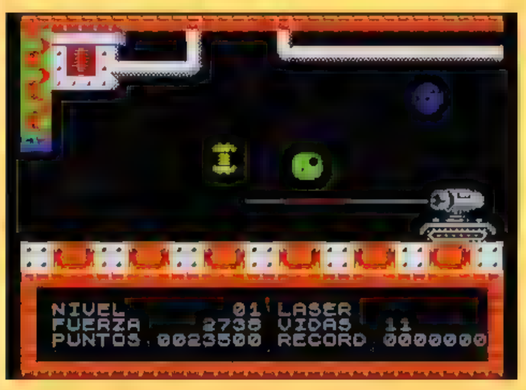
» [ZX Spectrum] It might not be *Dizzy*, but this offering is a decent alternative.

RETRO STINKER

» LOS ANGELES SWAT

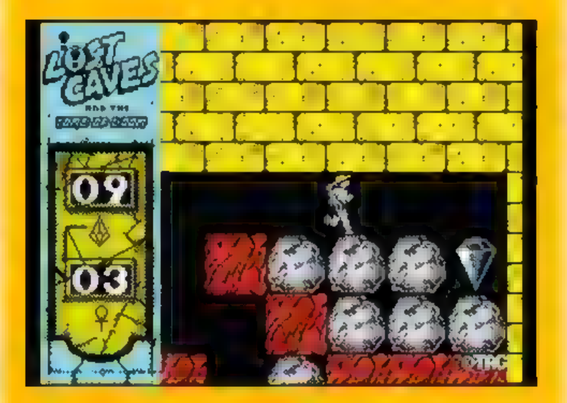
BEECHNUT ◘ 1988

Proving that the budget model was impervious to bad reviews, this beyond awful *Commando* clone somehow managed to shift more than 34,000 copies. We feel acute sadness for the poor beggars who bought this.



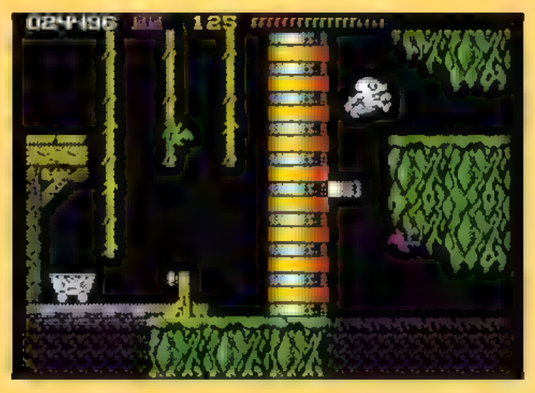
» THE LAST MISSION

■ Not to be confused with the ropy Data East coin-op conversion with the same title, this fantastic title from Spanish developer Opera Soft mixes exploration and shooting to excellent effect. The robot-tank-thing you control features a detectable gun turret which you can use to blast baddies and also open up doors, allowing you to proceed. It's a shame this wasn't picked up by a UK publisher as it would have been well received.



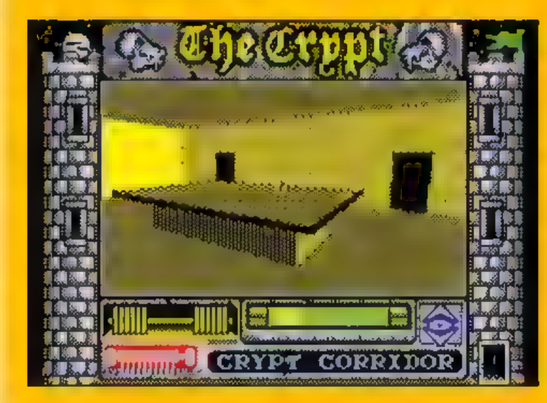
» LOST CAVES

■ There are many *Boulder Dash* clones available for the Spectrum, and most are better than the official conversion. This budget game is a brilliant example, featuring big ol' sprites, some cryptic caverns and a decent AY tune on the 128K version. What's strange is that the game wasn't reviewed or advertised in any of the main magazines, meaning it would have passed many people by. So now's the perfect time to put that right.



» IMPOSSAMOLE

■ Hardly the black sheep of the *Monty Mole* series (that honour surely goes to *Monty Is Innocent*), but it's easy to see why people didn't rate Monty's turn as supermole. Designed by Core, this was closer to *Rick Dangerous* than the platforming antics of yore, but there's still a great game here if you persist past the early levels. One legitimate complaint is that Monty moves in slow motion, but running the game at 7MHz fixes that.



» THE CRYPT

■ This sequel to *Castle Master* was exclusive to copies of the original game sold via the UK's Home Computer Club (and it later appeared on the *Virtual Worlds* compilation). Although smaller than the original, it still presents a solid challenge as you start six levels underground and have to escape to the surface. As with every Freescape game, if you're playing on the Next it benefits greatly from a CPU speed bump.

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Super Off Road

EASY PEASY LEMON SQUEEZY

» SNES » 1991 » SOFTWARE CREATIONS

Because my wife is all sorts of awesome she bought me a SNES game for Christmas 2019. Granted, it was actually a game that I had purchased myself, and afterwards I explained I would need £25 so she could wrap it up for me, but it was still a lovely thing to open on Christmas Day.

I've got many fond memories of playing *Super Off Road* when it was first released on the Super Nintendo at the back end of 1991, and I was hoping to relive those memories I had then by playing it with my daughter over the Christmas break. I must confess, though, that as much fun as we had, I don't actually think the game itself is particularly good on Nintendo's system.

For the most part it's very entertaining, and Software Creations should be commended for how accurate it feels next to the arcade original. Granted, the handling was never going to be the same as using a steering wheel, but the little trucks feel surprisingly authentic as they bump and jostle around the tracks. It looks great, too, with authentic-looking visuals, a great amount of animation on those little vehicles and neat little touches like flags wobbling as you hit them. It all looks tiny, but it *feels* big to play. Oh and it sounds absolutely fantastic due to an exceptional soundtrack by Tim and Geoff Follin (if I'm honest, the punchy soundtrack is the main reason I asked for the game).

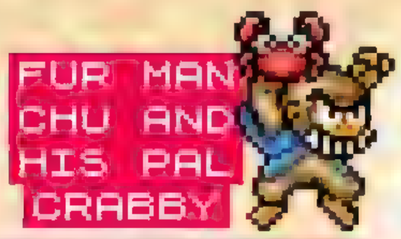
So what's wrong with the SNES version of *Super Off Road*? Simple, it's too easy. All you do is spend all your spare cash on nitro, using any leftover money to go towards acceleration, tires, top speed and shocks. Providing you boost ahead it's very hard to loose your lead so it quickly gets to a point where you build up countless nitro and boost yourself around the track. Sure, this is fun in itself, but because the game has no actual end you can effectively go on forever. Or in my case, until your daughter gets bored and goes back to suckle at YouTube's teat.

ULTIMATE GUIDE:

THE LEGEND OF THE MYSTICAL NINJA

THE MYSTICAL NINJA SERIES, OR GOEMON IN JAPAN, HAS A TROUBLED HISTORY. ITS ARCADE ORIGINATOR WAS LUKEWARM, FEW RELEASES WERE LOCALISED, AND NOW IT SEEMS ABANDONED. SAD, BECAUSE ITS FIRST OFFICIAL ENGLISH RELEASE IS ONE OF THE GEMS OF THE 16-BIT ERA

Words by John Szczepaniak



» The excellent artwork that featured on the western box art was created by Tom duBois.

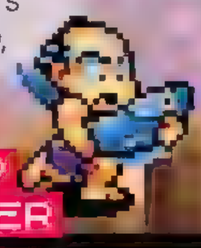
Starting in arcades in 1986 with Konami's *Mr Goemon*, our eponymous ninja didn't have the most auspicious starts. It featured a Hokusai-inspired art style and was fine to play, but no one would have expected any great legacy from it. There followed some sequels on the Famicom and MSX2 and then, in the summer of 1991, there was *Ganbare Goemon: Yukihime Kyuushutsu Emaki* for Super Famicom. It's hard to imagine but, as of writing this, the game is nearly 30 years old. It's also hard to tell what Konami's aspirations were for the title, given that the rudimentary credits list mainly programmers, with a few artists and musicians, almost as if the joyous mechanics within happened without planning. Under the title of 'Boss' the credits list programmer Shigeharu Umezaki, previously director on Konami's *Contra* and *Life Force*, and also coder on the next two Super Famicom sequels.

This was the first *Goemon* game to be localised, reaching America a year later as *The Legend Of The Mystical Ninja*. Sadly it suffered some censorship, losing the farting dance and striptease. It's unknown who translated it, but Goemon became Kid Ying and Ebisumaru became Dr Yang (get it?). The in-game English was clear, though maybe lost some of the original's humour, while the English manual was a hilarious gag-reel of outrageous puns and nonsensical jokes. Import purists may complain, but honestly the wacky shenanigans are in keeping with the series' tone.

» [SNES] In the theme park stage there are these body cutouts, where you can stick your head through. Pointless but fun.

Electronic Gaming Monthly judged it well, though complained it was too pastel, with scores of 8/8/9/8. The UK and European PAL territories wouldn't see reviews until December 1993 and, contrasting with our po-faced former colony, scores across the board were unanimously excellent; *CVG*, *Super Play*, *Total!*, *Game Zone*, and others, all scored it 90% or above. It also featured in the 2010 book, *1001 Video Games You Must Play Before You Die*.

These are the facts and yet, searching our shared collective memory, is that truly how *Mystical Ninja* is remembered? Despite the accolades, high scores, praise, and how everyone either played or knows someone who played it, the game never quite entered the SNES era's defining zeitgeist in the same way *Zelda*,



NAKED OTAFUKU

BOSS RUSH

TOGA POOCH

GINSU GRANNY

GHOST WOMAN

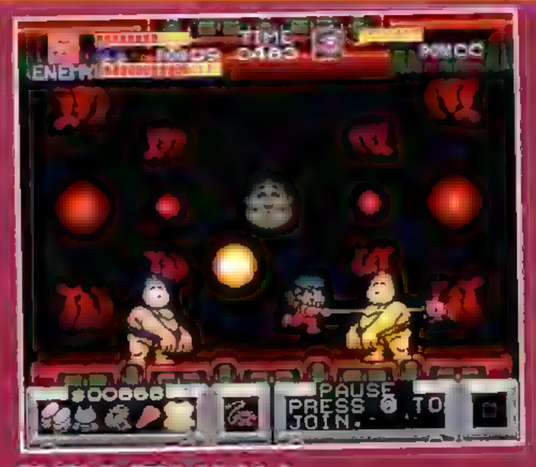
The game's first boss shows off some lovely sprite distortion and smart transparency effects. She's also why the northern part of town is haunted.

HOW TO BEAT IT: She's immune to direct attacks, so the trick is to hit and knock back the plates she throws. Be careful since they ricochet on the screen's edge.

LANTERN MAN

There's a festival in Shikoku! This intimidating beast has a fearsome mask and is found inside a southwesterly tent, surrounded by dancers and two taiko drummers.

HOW TO BEAT IT: His movement is restricted so stick to the screen edge. Though it's safe to stand on his striped platforms, you can also just shoot coins from afar.



OTAFUKU

Two bosses in one; it starts with sumo wrestlers throwing a ball, followed by a giant detached Mode 7 face that grows in size as it becomes more damaged.

HOW TO BEAT IT: Focus on one wrestler to halve your problems. For the face, watch out when the cheek-balls enter the eye sockets – that means it's angry!

SASUKE

Although Sasuke is playable in the later *Mystical Ninja* games, for this he's actually one of the bosses here! He's not evil though, just protecting his inventor.

HOW TO BEAT IT: This is where bombs are the most useful! Their arcing trajectory allows you to attack safely both above and below. Just don't fall off!

KABUKI

High atop Tengu Mountain is this kabuki warrior, complete with a neat flying wig! He's also the toughest boss in the game with devastating range.

HOW TO BEAT IT: No special trick, it's a battle of attrition! The preceding village sells no inventory restoratives; make sure you've been stockpiling since Zone III.

HAKURYU

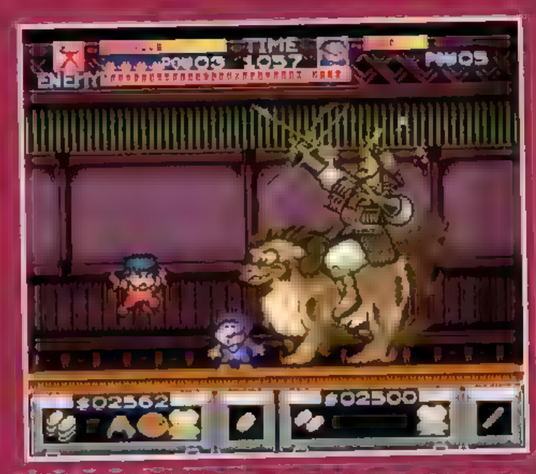
You visit the Dragon Pond in Izumo while searching for the magical White Mirror. Hakuryu is actually a guardian spirit protecting the mirror you seek.

HOW TO BEAT IT: Be patient, his attack pattern is slow and basic. You're only going to get hit if you're greedy when retaliating. Spare some coins for sniping.

DARUMA

There are two bosses in this stage, midway and at the end, based on Japanese Daruma toys. The first has coloured blocks, the second spiked arms.

HOW TO BEAT IT: The first form's head is always vulnerable no matter its position, so jump to attack. The second form is so easy it has no health bar!



HANNYA SHOGUN

The final showdown actually starts with a battle against Lantern Man and Otafuku. Only afterwards do you face the leader of the Hannya gang!

HOW TO BEAT IT: This guy is immune to normal attacks; you need to jump and strike one of the arrows he shoots, so it deflects into the face of his mount.

DEAR DEER

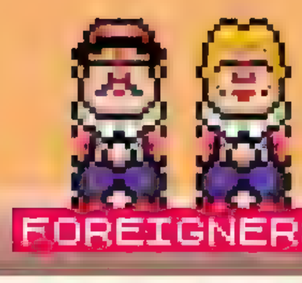
KONAMI GIRL

Final Fantasy, or even Konami's own *Castlevania* and *Contra* titles did. Heralded as good, maybe even great, but never legendary. If you've eagerly read this far to the fourth paragraph, then you know what we're going to say (and are in agreement). **Retro Gamer** sees *The Legend Of The Mystical Ninja* as an essential part of experiencing the 16-bit era, and the equal of Konami's other classics.

Functionally it's similar to *Zelda*, albeit with chronological stages and alternating overhead/side-scrolling sections. A blend of action platforming with light RPG overtones. The game starts with an impressive for the time cinematic, complete with written dialogue and Mode 7 facilitated close-ups. The ghost woman of Horo temple is acting strangely so the two comrades vow to investigate. Thus players are thrust into a satire of ancient Japan; houses with sliding paper doors, fishmongers with oversized catches, while the music is unmistakably eastern. Here also is one of *Mystical Ninja*'s strengths – make a mental note of what you see, because each stage will introduce numerous single-use qualia. Some aspects, such as spear enemies and stores, show up throughout, but so much else is unique.

The ghosts of the haunted village; the action-stage bell which kills all enemies; the taiko drummers at the festival; the burger joint at the theme park; a multitude of Mode 7 gimmicks (rotating stages, inflating bosses); even a *Kid Dracula* secret if you know where to look. Not to mention the restaurants which restore health. In any other game you'd have a text menu, maybe three generic items repeated forever – in *Mystical Ninja* there are 20 distinct little graphics representing real delicacies, and they all just do the same thing. ▶

HANNYA CARPENTER



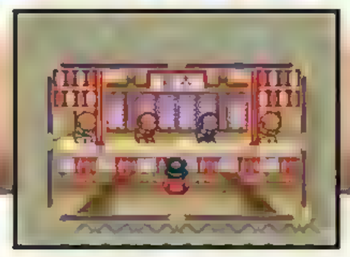
MINIGAME MAYHEM

FRANK'S FOR THE MEMORIES

Also known as the Concentration Game, it's the standard match-two-faces card game we all know. It's fun, earns money, and there's only six possible patterns. A perfect game nets $720.

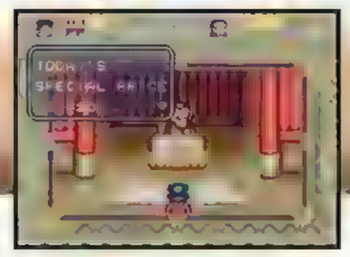
U-BETCHA CASINO

Three dice are thrown and you need to guess whether the total is low (ten or less) or high (11 or more). Since the range is between three and 18, you basically have a 50/50 chance of getting it right.



SAMMY RYE'S CIRCUS SIDESHOW

The scientific explanation for this game would be described as: expulsion of methane from one's colon via dilation of the anus. Basically watch Ebisumaru dance, split into four, then fart 'til you blackout.



FORTUNE HUT

Pay a fee to have your fortune told. If good, you walk outside to be greeted by women who give you money; if bad, you're accosted by enemies or, worse, deer who can't be killed without fines!

BREAK DOWN THE WALL

Sadly not an introspective reflection on how the collapse of the Berlin Wall changed the political sociocultural landscape, but rather just *Breakout*. AKA *Arkanoid*. AKA *Block Kuzushi*.

MOLE

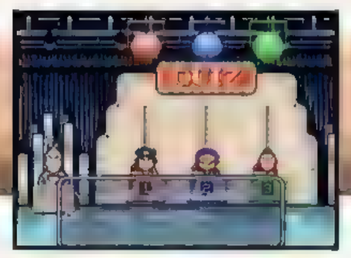
Classed as a job, a perfect session nets you between $600 and $700. It's also fast, so with a little practice can be the primary earner when grinding for cash. Each button corresponds to a mole's hole.

PAINT

Another job, this time it's a game of snake where your tail just keeps growing. If you double back over yourself then it's game over. Mildly entertaining but very difficult to earn good money.

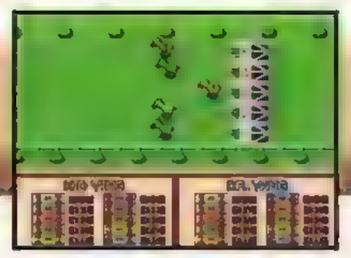
GOBLIN

Try to throw balls at a demon's vase using a moving reticule. The cheapest job in *Mystical Ninja* but also the worst to play. Stupidly difficult and just boring. Never ever play this.



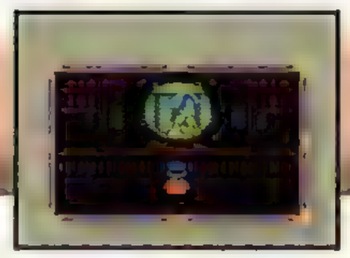
UNCLE CHAN'S QUESTION PALACE

A cool quiz show with questions based on in-game events. Tip: when you first push the controller button to start the question, keep it held down to speed up the text and beat your opponents.



FAST EDDIE'S HORSE TRACK

You need to pick both the first and second place winners, making this one a bit tricky. The odds shown affect payouts, but really there's no skill here. It's all luck and the winner seems arbitrary.

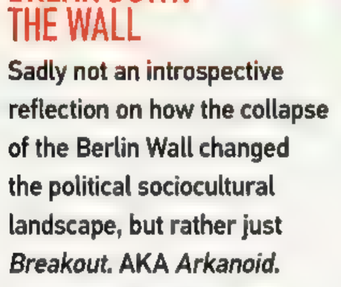


STRIPTEASE

Censored in the west, the data for this room was seemingly removed from the ROM. In the Japanese version, in Warlock Zone VI, Goemon fist-pumps the sky while watching a non-nude striptease.

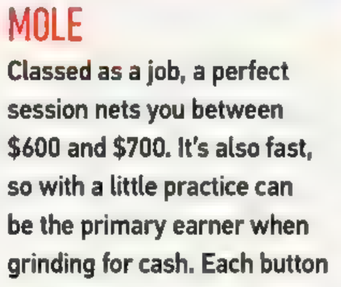
GRADIUS

A cute, shrunken-down version of the entire opening stage of *Gradius*. The power-ups and enemies are all here, just adorably small now. You might as well call it *Chibi Gradius*!



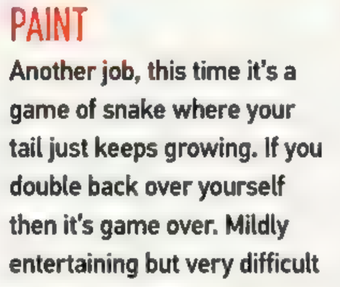
LOTTERY HOUSE

Pay $100 to select an animal and letter, then hope they come up during the draw. You're guaranteed to win the number draw, which yields $50. Matching animals and letters is difficult, though.



MAZE

A slow-moving first-person maze, sort of like *Wizardry* but without enemies. There's two in the entire game, and they yield some decent rewards, but the novelty of it wears off fast.



HOCKEY

Explore the sad reality of working class life in a northern British town as you befriend a kestrel. Not really, it's just air hockey. Like normal hockey, but played with an oxidised trombone.

» [SNES] Tengu Mountain not only has the toughest boss in the game, but reaching it involves nightmarish platforming amidst flying enemies.

All of this is why even 30 years later the game holds up well. Everything, every stage, every foe, is part of an ostentatious framework of redundancy and novelty. When you play it today, try to imagine how much effort the developers must have put in, creating objects and situations which would last only seconds.

Investigating the ghost woman expands to tracking down a counterfeiting gang, disrupting a festival, discovering the Otafu Army has kidnapped princess Yuki, and rescuing ninja spy Yae. The scope of the adventure grows and suddenly Goemon/Kid Ying and Ebisumaru/Dr Yang are fighting wooden robots, getting shot through the sky, awakening a guardian spirit, and ultimately liberating the Kingdom Of Ryukyu and its true ruler while tussling with some mischievous animal spirits and the Hannya Shogun (who has made the castle fly!). Each new area brings a new twist or unique mechanic, keeping the entire rollercoaster adventure fresh. Is it not the same as *Castlevania* or *Contra*?

The other strength of *Mystical Ninja*, in addition to its pursuit of novelty, is how the game is presented as a buffet of indulgences, rather than just a goal-oriented challenge. Over the course of the nine Warlock Zones are a multitude of pleasurable

» [SNES] There's a diverse array of enemies throughout, often based on cultural jokes. Beware the thieves which can steal items.

» [SNES] Hitting certain walls gains access to underground bonuses. Make sure you have at least three sandals to jump over stones.

» [SNES] Not only does this transparent waterfall look stunning, but you need to alternate between platforming in front and behind it!

distractions. Some, such as the jobs, serve the function of increasing money, but many are there just for amusement. Academically it could be asked if these exist to mask shortcomings of the core game, since a distracted player is less critical. But if you strip away the dice games, card games, horse racing, *Gradius* arcade and so on, you're still left with some excellent action stages, tight controls, great music, and sublime use of the SNES's available 32,768 colours. The many unnecessary frivolities are not there to distract from the core, but rather supplement it, so as to allow players to luxuriate at their own pace, in a fun and original world.

It's unfathomable why *Mystical Ninja* didn't storm the sales charts and open the way for its sequels to be localised. Some have argued the game is 'too Japanese', but is it really? The colours are bright, the sound upbeat, the dynamic rhythm of the exploration and action stages nicely balanced, while the RPG-lite mechanics are accessible without being shallow. Would such things alienate a young British player? It is the everyman game, crafted to be loved by everyone.

Today the game can be experienced in several ways, including a port to the GBA and Virtual Console release, both of which remedy the inconvenience of passwords. As to the future, the series has been dormant since the 2005 Japanese DS game, with the last western release being in 1998 on N64! Hopefully, Konami revives the series, if not an original title then a compilation. The surreal and indulgent flamboyance of the first release gives a glimmer of how much potential the property has. ✱

Special thanks to Jessica Gonzales of retrographicbooksllc.com for supplying hi-res original box art by Tom duBois.

THE LEGEND CONTINUES

MORE MYSTICAL SNES ADVENTURES

GANBARE GOEMON 2: KITERETSU SHOGUN MAGGINESU

Two years and two sequels (on Game Boy and Famicom) later, and we have the first Super Famicom follow-up, subtitled *Strange General McGuinness*. It's certainly strange, featuring bunny men and deadly hairdos! Structurally it's more like *Super Mario World*, with an overworld map and stages. It also introduces Impact robot battles, and a controllable Sasuke.

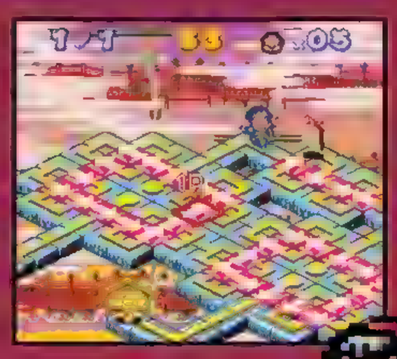
GANBARE GOEMON 3: SHISHI JYUUROKUBEI NO KARAKURI MANJI KATAME

Another year another *Goemon*, Konami now churning them out regularly. This time Yae is also playable and it riffs very heavily on *A Link To The Past*. The gang time travel to a futuristic feudal Japan, riding in mechanical suits and chasing Ebisumaru's nun descendant! Like *Goemon 2* it now has a fan translation.

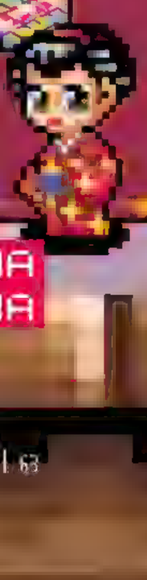
GANBARE GOEMON KIRAKIRA DOUCHUU: BOKU GA DANCER NI NATTA WAKE

Subtitled *The Glittering Journey: The Reason I Became A Dancer*, this is the craziest *Goemon* in the entire series, set in outer space with aliens resembling Impact! The structure reverts to *Goemon 2*'s selectable stages and there's a ton of satirical new minigames. Graphically the pinnacle of 16-bit Konami.

SOREYUKE EBISUMARU! KARAKURI MEIRO – KIETA GOEMON NO NAZO!!



Released in 1996 this was the last Super Famicom game in the series, though it's more of a shoddy spin-off and doesn't really feature Goemon himself. Instead you're controlling Ebisumaru, in a sort of cross between *Lemmings* and *Pipe Dream*. Move the tiles so as to guide him to safety!



THE UNCONVERTED

Arcade games that never made it home

WING WAR

DEVELOPER: **SEGA AM1** · YEAR: **1994** GENRE: **FLIGHT SIMULATOR**

■ Sega's Model 1 board occupies an odd space in the company's history – it was clearly a revolutionary arcade board and home to some classic games, but it often tends to be overlooked due to the low number of games that actually ran on it. *Wing War*, AM1's only game for the board, is even odder in that it actually supports another revolutionary but rarely utilised piece of Sega arcade hardware: the R-360 cabinet, capable of simulating the full motion of the aircraft. However, the game was more commonly found in twin sit-down cabinets.

Wing War gives players the simple task of shooting each other down to progress through a tournament. You have access to eight aircraft, including classic biplanes, modern fighter jets and attack helicopters, each of which is equipped with machine guns and a limited supply of rockets. It's also possible to deploy plumes of smoke to thwart incoming missiles and each craft also has access to unique special tricks, such as corkscrew loops or double tail spins, used for both movement and evasion. There are two modes of play. The simpler of the two is Dogfight mode, in which players fly through an environment on rails and control is handled much as it is in *Space Harrier*, with each player alternating between attack and defence phases. In Expert mode, you gain full control of your aircraft, including use of the throttle that is disabled in Dogfight, and must fight in a limited but open 3D space with ground obstacles.

Though *Wing War* never made a transition to consoles, that's not to say there were no plans to bring it home – though too visually primitive for the Saturn, the untextured polygon graphics would be a perfect fit for the more limited capabilities of the 32X. Work was definitely started, as M2 found the prototype data for the conversion while working on *Sega Ages: Virtua Racing* in 2019, but the project was quickly abandoned once the commercial failure of the Mega Drive add-on became apparent. If *Wing War* is ever likely to come home, it's as part of this range.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

G-LOC

1990

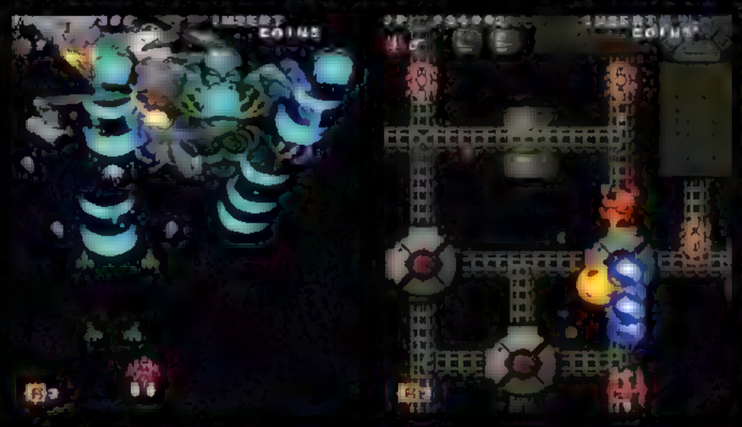
■ The combination of alternating on-rails combat and true 3D warfare is a pretty unique one, so few converted games compare meaningfully. That leaves the only other R-360 game, *G-LOC*. This was converted to the Mega Drive, Master System, Game Gear, Amiga, Atari ST, Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC.

EXPLOSIVE BREAKER

DEVELOPER: **KANEKO** YEAR: **1992** GENRE: **SHOOT-'EM-UP**

■ **It can be tempting to want to jump on the latest development trends, especially when they seem to deliver commercial success.** However, misapplication of technology can lead to some very odd results, as Kaneko's shooter proves. Whoever was in charge of graphics for this game seemed to just love the use of random digitised pictures. You'll be happily bopping along when suddenly, a hostile carrier floats into view, or maybe a helicopter that is blown open to reveal a gigantic alien inhabitant. These bizarre graphical choices are something that you have to experience at least once.

Unfortunately, these oddities are the only particularly noteworthy aspect of *Explosive Breaker*, which is otherwise a competent but unremarkable shooter. It's nothing you'll regret playing, but we can see exactly why it didn't leave the arcades.



» [Arcade] Why does this helicopter have a weird alien in it? Ask Kaneko, not us.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

TRUXTON

1988

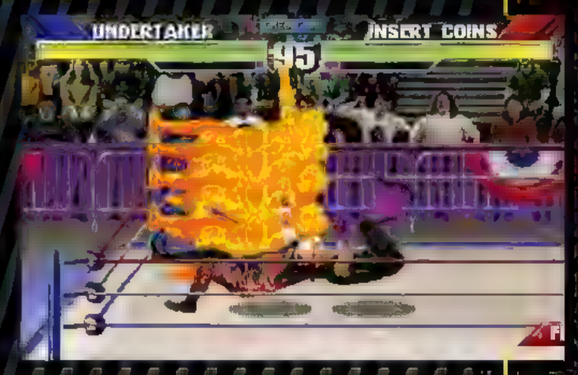
■ Toaplan's shoot-'em-up always comes to mind whenever we think about flashy bomb animations, an area in which *Explosive Breaker* excels. *Truxton* is clearly the better game, though. You can get it for the Mega Drive and PC Engine, or on mobile devices running iOS and Android as *Truxton Classic*.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

WWF WRESTLEMANIA

1995

■ Despite being released during one of the WWF's worst years both creatively and commercially, this overblown *NBA Jam*-style take on wrestling is excellent knockabout fun with all the top 'New Generation' stars. It's available for SNES, Mega Drive, 32X, Saturn, PlayStation and PC, with most conversions being very good.



RING OF DESTRUCTION: SLAM MASTERS II

DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** YEAR: **1994** GENRE: **FIGHTING**

■ ***Saturday Night Slam Masters* is a cult favourite amongst Capcom's arcade games, but this sequel is rarely ever acknowledged.** Why could that be? Well, we'd guess it has something to do with being a compromise between wrestling games and fighting games that is unlikely to satisfy either audience.

That's not to say that *Ring Of Destruction* is entirely bad, of course. It's an attractive game that adds plenty of characters to the original *SNSM* cast. However, much of the wrestling structure has been removed – you can only move on a single plane and there's no way to pin your opponents, so knockouts are the primary means of victory.

» [Arcade] Haggar is about to piledrive this guy, quite literally, through the ring itself.

It seems Capcom wasn't especially confident in this game, as it appears to have had limited distribution within Japan and Europe. Given that it was more of a fighting game than before, and Capcom had plenty of popular games in that genre, it's no wonder it didn't receive any ports.

BEST LEFT IN THE ARCADE

ZUNZUNKYOU NO YABOU

DEVELOPER: **MINATO GIKEN/SEGA AM1** YEAR: **1994** GENRE: **SHOOT-'EM-UP**

■ **We love a shmup with unusual themes here at Retro Gamer, but this isn't great.** Playing as an animated Jizo statue – something you might have seen in *Super Mario Bros 3* – your goal is to choose one of the four bosses, then shoot through screens of bizarre enemies until you meet and defeat it. Despite having full freedom of movement around each arena, it's only possible to shoot upwards, making it closer to something like *Space Invaders* than you might think, given the initial similarities to *Robotron*. The game is mechanically simple and quickly becomes frustratingly tough, so before too long the novelty of the bizarre visuals wears off.

It's telling that the game didn't receive a conversion, despite running on the Mega Drive-based System C2. We don't doubt that some of the appeal is lost due to having been raised in a culture where knowledge of Buddhism is low, but honestly the underlying game design doesn't hold up in the same way as something like *Fantasy Zone* or *Parodius*.

THE MAKING OF

FREESPACE 2

Volition veterans **Adam Pletcher** and **Jason Scott** reveal how a talented team created one of the greatest space games of all time, one that still commands a cult following to this day, in less than a year

WORDS BY PAUL WALKER-EMIG

The backstory behind the development of *FreeSpace 2* sounds like a recipe for disaster.

The first *FreeSpace* game – a spin-off from the *Descent* series – was released in 1998. "Once we saw *FreeSpace* selling well, both Interplay and Volition were interested in turning it into a series," designer Adam Pletcher recalls. So far so good. The only problem was that development on the game didn't begin until the end of 1998 and the developers were tasked with completing it for October 1999, giving them less than a year. You wouldn't be surprised if what came out at the end of this rushed development cycle was a complete mess. But, somehow, the team at Volition created a classic of the space sim genre. Not only that: it was finished a month early.

To achieve this impressive turnaround, the team had to curb some of its early ambitions. "Two ideas I remember discussing were ship interiors and planets, but neither of those features would have been feasible in our short timeframe," writer Jason Scott tells us. "We were planning a DLC pack set in the Sol system where we would've used our nebula features to create gas giant missions, but we cancelled that add-on early in its development."

The focus instead had to be placed on what about the first game could be enhanced and what key additions would make the biggest impact. A starting point was the new possibilities offered by nascent hardware acceleration tech. "I remember we wanted to improve some of the visuals," Adam tells us. "This was the start of the era where games could require video hardware acceleration, and we really tried to capitalise on that with *FreeSpace 2*. Switching from a polygon-based nebula background to one that used big detailed textures was a big deal for us. Flying through the volumetric nebulae was another one, and [that] let the designers create new kinds of mission objectives.

"On the gameplay front, we wanted the big ships to have more interesting behaviour, weapons and overall role in the battles," Adam continues. "I think the details added there really helped flesh out the chaotic aerial combat feel of the missions."

Jason and Adam explain that part of the reason the team was able to complete the game so quickly, was that it didn't go overboard on new features and wisely choose to zero in on elements that would bring something significantly worthwhile to the experience.

"We chose a small set of new features – nebula, beam weapons, large capital ships – and reused a lot of content from the first game," Jason recalls. "And studio and project leaders (Mike Kulas, Philip Holt, Jim Boone, Adam Pletcher, Dave Baranec) intervened when scope threatened to get out of hand. For example, an early version of the story featured seven factions and – as I seem to recall – an entirely new race, but that proposal was mercifully shot down. To get the game done on time and on budget, we had to focus and simplify."

» Adam Pletcher has been in the business for decades, working on titles like *Descent* through to *Saints Row IV*.

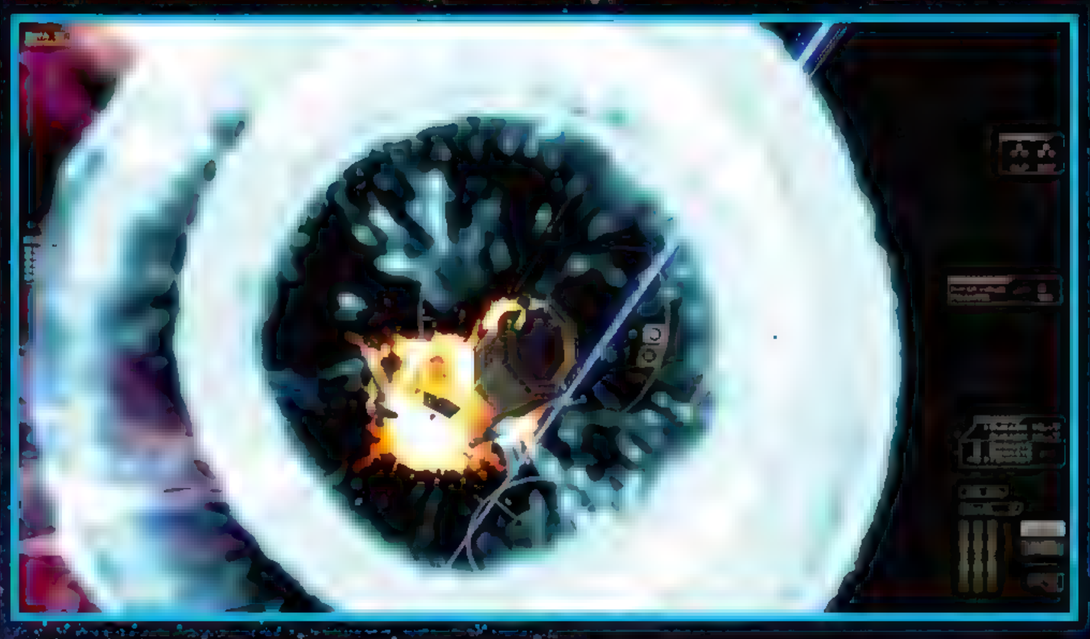
» Jason Scott stuck around at Volition, working across a broad range of well-received titles.

"I forgot about all those factions," Adam responds. "Really, that was the heart of it, just careful management of scope. We already had a list of technical and design features we couldn't fit into the original *FreeSpace*. It made a great starting point for the sequel and helped keep everyone focused. Like, 'Here's the game we *really* wanted to make.'"

The improvements Jason and Adam mention were a significant part of what makes *FreeSpace 2* feel special. Having multiple gigantic capital ships going at it, their powerful beam weapons lighting up space as you flitted about among them doing battle with other small fighters, gave battles a real sense of scale. You often had a very specific job to do, tasked with performing a small role, such as protecting a particular ship from bombers, rather than being an all-destroying hero doing everything

» [PC] Hunting down and destroying bombs is one of the most important parts of defending a cruiser. On the flip side, there are missions where you get to unleash them.

FREESPACE 2



[PC] Ah, the spectacular site of failure. Well, at least it looks cool.

[PC] Large ships will always be accompanied by fighters and other small ships, and it's usually your job to deal with them.

"ONCE WE SAW FREESPACE SELLING WELL, BOTH INTERPLAY AND VOLITION WERE INTERESTED IN TURNING IT INTO A SERIES"

ADAM PLETCHER

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** INTERPLAY
- **DEVELOPER:** VOLITION
- **RELEASED:** 1999
- **PLATFORM:** PC
- **GENRE:** SPACE COMBAT SIM

yourself. This was an interesting and refreshing approach that tied in nicely with an overarching story that placed you in the position of being a cog in a machine who was only told what they needed to know.

"The universe of *FreeSpace* is very impersonal," Jason says. "Your character is referred to only as 'pilot' or 'Alpha 1', and you're up against countless waves of a seemingly unbeatable, genocidal adversary that never communicates its goals or motives. In the briefings we tried to convey the sense of a much larger conflict unfolding in multiple systems, while at the same time hinting that your commanders weren't telling you the full story. Mechanically, beam weapons transformed capital ships from floating space furniture into lethal weapon platforms that could blow you to pieces with little warning. All these factors created a sense of alienation, tension, and discomfort."

"I think the addition of flak cannons really pushed the immersion factor up in those battles," Adam reflects. "They were a key tool for the big ships to fend off the smaller fighters, but more importantly they were *loud*. Explosions going off all around you, it really raised the intensity of those missions."

The game appears to make a conscious effort to weave missions into its story, building drama and weaving things together logically, rather than stringing together a random series of objectives. We ask if this was a part of the ethos of the game's mission design.

"The *FreeSpace* Editor (FRED) enabled designers to build missions very quickly, and because missions all took place in open space, designers didn't have to worry about building environments and all the complexity that involves," Jason explains. "But FRED's strengths were also a weakness in that missions could easily fall apart without some architecture and terrain to shape the action. At one point, we jettisoned the entire first act and started over, placing more emphasis on raising the stakes, building tension, and pacing the experience more intentionally. We got a little too heavy-handed at times, with all the missions about protecting tiny, vulnerable shuttles and cargo ships wending their way through angry swarms of attackers."

FreeSpace 2's campaign holds

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SUMMONER
SYSTEM: PS2, PC, MAC
YEAR: 2000

RED FACTION
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 2001

SAINTS ROW (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: XBOX 360
YEAR: 2006

[PC] Battling with small fighters among gigantic cruisers firing their beam weapons across space gives an incredible sense of scale to battles.

[PC] Playing through *FreeSpace 2* with updated visuals courtesy of fan mods is an experience we'd recommend.

up today, but modern audiences might be a little unsettled by the relative complexity of the game's controls. There are multiple keys for locking onto different kinds of targets, shield quadrants could be adjusted on the fly and players could manually reallocate power between engines, shields and weapons to boost one system's performance at the expense of others. Today, developers would likely be nervous about alienating a broader audience with this, and we wonder whether that was a concern at the time, or simply a reflection of what PC games were like back at the turn of the millennium?

"We wanted players to feel like pilots in control of a complex, powerful, responsive and technological advanced machine," Jason explains. "Complexity was a virtue, though it limited the market to a more hardcore segment."

"Making something deep yet easy to learn is a constant struggle for game designers," says Adam. "We didn't always strike the right balance there, but I think we did okay. I remember arguing against Mike Kulas' 'target my target's target' command, saying it was feature-creep and just absurdly named. But we would often just try something out before punting it, and I'm glad we did with that one. It was one of the most useful combat features in the game. Still, it's one of those things no new player needs to know in order to have fun."

> "WE WANTED PLAYERS TO FEEL LIKE PILOTS IN CONTROL OF A COMPLEX, POWERFUL, RESPONSIVE, AND TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED MACHINE"
> **JASON SCOTT**

Volition also made huge improvements to the game's multiplayer segment. The mode was forward-thinking, including leaderboards, stat tracking, and a persistent mode where players could battle over territory called SquadWar. "Going back to *Descent*, our studio had learned a lot about the technical requirements for solid multiplayer, and we just felt like this stuff was taking the next step," says Adam. "Dave Baranec was nearly a one-man show there, in terms of the programming details.

"Developing our own homemade global matchmaking system was pretty nuts, in hindsight," he reflects. "It originally had a lot of bugs and the leaderboards were pretty hackable, as we discovered later, but overall I think it turned out pretty great. The squadrons thing was my favourite. At the time, a lot of us were playing team-based multiplayer games, like Threewave Capture The Flag in *Quake*, *Tribes*, etc. Clans were totally a thing, and we just wanted a space combat take on that."

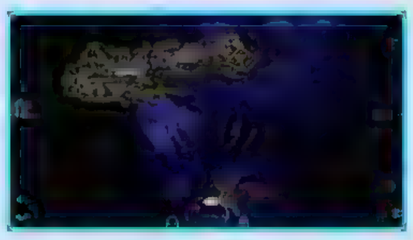
Yet despite its innovative ideas in the realm of multiplayer, the awe-inspiring sense of scale of its battles, its carefully constructed lore, compelling combat systems and the praise it received from critics, *FreeSpace 2* was not a financial success. Finishing the game a month ahead of its deadline probably ended up hindering it in this respect, Adam tells us. "I think this posed a problem for Interplay. Most of a game's marketing spend has to be booked well in advance of it hitting the shelves. Interplay wasn't fully prepared to ship *FreeSpace 2* a month ahead of schedule."

BEYOND FREESPACE 2

EXAMINING THE BEST MODS

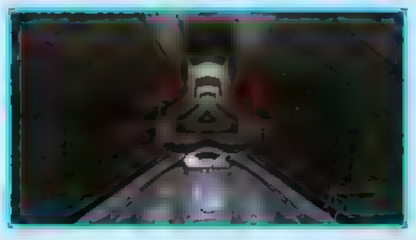
BLUE PLANET

The *Blue Planet* collection contains a series of campaigns that pick up 18 years after *FreeSpace 2* left off, starting with the GTVA finally getting back to Terra. This is a fantastic effort at making, effectively, *FreeSpace 3* and features a well-told story along with some epic battles.



MEDIA VPS

Updated models and graphical effects the community has put together to make the old *FreeSpace 2* look like a million bucks. This pack is essential to play many other mods and a great way of experience the original game, the work done here should not be overlooked.



DIASPORA

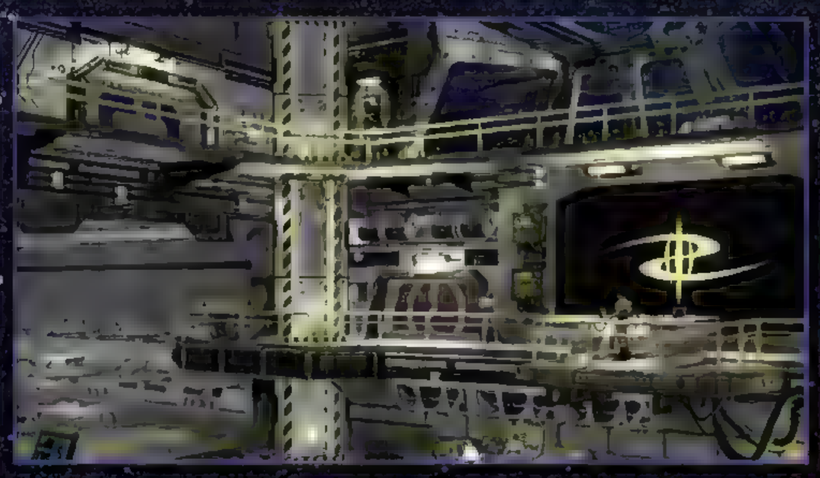
For fans of *Battlestar Galactica*, this mod is a dream come true. With ships, weapons and even gameplay tweaks to match the fiction established by the show. The game lets you live through the events of the acclaimed series, set just as the Cylons return to wreak havoc.

WINGS OF DAWN

One of the most highly regarded *FreeSpace 2* mods is this anime-inspired tale that mixes the space combat of the original game with visual novel-like sections, telling a story of a galaxy-wide war as it pushes *FreeSpace 2*'s engine into unintended directions.

STAR WARS

Let's be frank, this mod doesn't quite have the depth to it in terms of what it does with combat and mechanics when compared to other mods on our list. Still, the visual and aural spectacle of experiencing the sights of sounds of famous *Star Wars* battles makes up for that.



» [PC] It's usually a good idea to keep your distance from big ships like these, unless you're playing a bombing mission.

Regardless, there were bigger problems. "By the time we shipped, Interplay was in its death spiral, and I don't think their marketing team was prepared or equipped to give *FreeSpace 2* the attention and resources it needed to be commercially successful," says Jason. "That said, some aspects of the game probably limited the size of our market, such as the complexity of the controls and the need for a flight stick when fewer players were investing in that kind of hardware. *FreeSpace 2*'s darker tone and more impersonal universe may also have been a harder sell for players looking for an experience that was more character-driven."

"That's all true, I think," says Jason. "Gaming trends were shifting, and the space sim market was shrinking as a natural result. I never thought Interplay didn't care, it's just that they had bigger (money) problems developing at the time."

This killed the possibility of a sequel, but Jason tells us there were ideas. The GTVA likely would have found their way back to Earth and the Shivans would have launched an invasion using jump nodes created by the supernova they collapsed at the end of *FreeSpace 2*. "We had discussed taking the fight to the Shivans in *FreeSpace 3*, going to 'Shivantown' for the final confrontation," Jason reveals. "Along the way, we'd find out what happened to Admiral Bosch and his ill-fated experiment. If we had thought *FreeSpace 2* would be the last game in the franchise, we would have ended the narrative more conclusively."

Thankfully, this was not the end of *FreeSpace*. In 2002, Volition released the source code to a dedicated fanbase who took the ball and ran with it, updating *FreeSpace 2*'s visuals and creating their own campaigns to continue the *FreeSpace* story. "What I'm most proud of is seeing a talented mod community use the FRED toolset to build a library of content that's more expansive and in many ways more interesting than what we had originally shipped in the box," says Jason. "Every few months I'll take a look at what the community is still doing with *FreeSpace 2*," Adam tells us, "and it always impresses me. It's great to see fans still being so creative."

MASTER SPACE

HOW TO BECOME A BETTER FIGHTER PILOT

TARGET EFFECTIVELY

Learning all the different targeting controls (target hostiles, escorts, bombs, friendlies, subsystems, etc) might seem like a hassle, but it'll pay off by making you quicker and more efficient in combat. It's also worth having autotargetting and automatch speed turned on most of the time.

USE YOUR COMMS

It's far too easy to forget that you have wings at your command once you've gotten past the very early sections of the game. Ordering other fighters and wings to protect key ships or take out crucial targets can be the difference between success and failure.

PLAY THE OBJECTIVE

Remember what your job is in each mission. If you get distracted by dogfights when you're supposed to be bombing a capital ship, or protecting one of your own from hostiles, you will fail. It's as simple as that.

ADJUST YOUR SHIELDS

Readjusting your shields can be very effective. For example, when making a run towards a capital ship to bomb it, focus your power on your front shields. Conversely, when you're in a dogfight and being hit from behind, focus power on your rear shields to minimise the damage you take.

POSITIONING IS IMPORTANT

It's very easy to lose sense of where you are in a space battle. Be careful not to get drawn towards enemy capital ships when you're dogfighting – you'll be bombarded with flak and beam turrets. Try kiting enemy wings towards your own capital ships so that they suffer that fate instead.

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Banjo-Kazooie

» **PLATFORM:** N64 » **RELEASED:** 1998 » **DEVELOPER:** RARE

One of the best moments from Rare's fifth game comes as you explore the beachy delights of Treasure Trove Cove. As you might have guessed from its name, *Banjo-Kazooie*'s second world has a distinctive island theme and it's rife with fun things to discover, including the chance to help out a weeping pirate hippo by retrieving his gold, having a claws-to-pincer encounter with a giant crab named Nipper, as well as the ability to embark on a thrill-seeking treasure hunt around the cove itself.

Banjo's jaunt around the island also leads to one of the best moments in the level – namely the ability to finally take to the air thanks to his partner, Kazooie. Of course, you know it's coming because Kazooie chides the move-teaching mole Bottles about it as she and Banjo learn new abilities, but it still doesn't detract from how great it feels once you finally take to the skies and see the entire cove enticingly available to you. It offers a brilliant sense of freedom and allows you to appreciate Rare's incredible work at the same time.

BIO

Super Mario 64's influence in *Banjo-Kazooie* is obvious from the moment Banjo leaves his house. Rare's ambitious platformer also features plenty of its own delightful ideas, though, including its clever pairing of a bear and bird to create an excellent range of moves that easily rivals Mario's athleticism. Like Nintendo, Rare realised that conventional 2D platformer design wouldn't work in a 3D environment, so the team created a selection of memorable locations for the pair to run riot in. The end result was not only one of the best platformers on the system but yet another example of Rare's mastery of Nintendo's 64-bit console.

MORE CLASSIC BANJO-KAZOOIE MOMENTS

Gettin' Jiggy Wit It

Banjo-Kazooie requires you to collect a large number of different items, but one of the most important is the collecting of 'Jiggies' cute, anthropomorphic puzzle pieces that are needed to allow access to the many worlds found in Gruntilda's cavernous lair. Collect a piece and you're treated to a delightful little animation of Banjo holding aloft their prize and Kazooie snatching it from his paw.

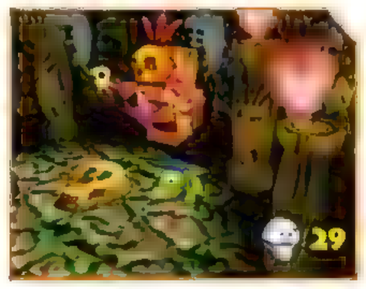
Banjo Hoedown

Rare has always been known for its humour and that comes to the fore almost immediately in *Banjo-Kazooie*'s riotously funny intro sequence. After a bug crashes into the Rare logo and tumbles into a pond, our heroic bear taps on the TV screen and launches into a banjo solo, only to be continuously upstaged by Mumbo Jumbo. The resulting duel is wonderfully silly.

Lazy Bear

Banjo has a unique relationship with pal Kazooie, the bear typically does most of the grunt work during the game, whether it's rolling into enemies to defeat them or crawling up trees to discover what treasures they hide. It's hilarious, then, to watch his relaxed expression whenever the 'Talon Trot' is unleashed and the tired bear finally gets to put his feet up for a short while.

Animal Magic



Although Banjo and Kazooie have a wide range of abilities between them sometimes a Jiggie is impossible to reach without a little additional help. Fortunately, as long as Banjo and Kazooie ply shaman Mumbo Jumbo with 'Mumbo Tokens' he'll turn the pair into a variety of animals, including a termite, crocodile and walrus, enabling them to retrieve those annoyingly out-of-the-way puzzle pieces.

Denki has created close to 200 games over the past two decades, making it one of the world's most prolific developers. But not even Sky was the limit of its ambitions, as Gary Penn explains

Words by David Crookes

One of the big complaints people make about television is that there are so many channels but nothing to watch. Even today we can find schedules chock-full of repeats of the most dire of programmes endlessly running one after another.

Back in October 2001, however, Sky Television (or BSkyB as it was known) sought to give viewers an alternative to aimless channel-hopping. It tapped into the videogame market by launching Sky Gamestar, which grew to host many casual titles over a good number of years.

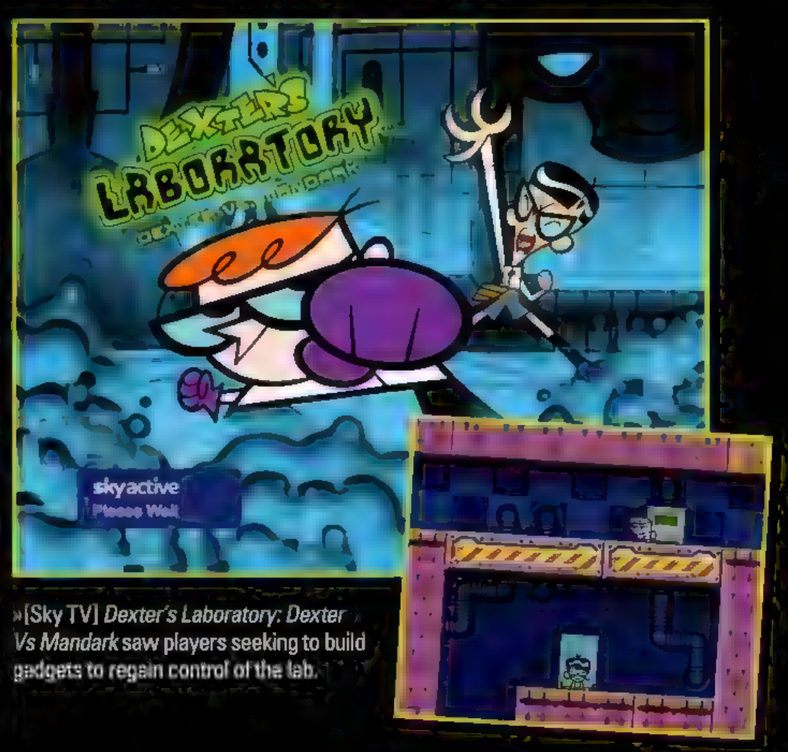
By pressing the 'Interactive' button on the Sky remote and selecting '6', viewers could enjoy games based on classic characters such as Scooby Doo and Tom and Jerry, as well as lots of original content. But who was making these titles? The answer to that lies, in part, with a small Dundee-based developer called Denki.

For much of the Noughties, Denki was one of the most prolific videogame developers in the world. Set up in March 2000 by four former DMA Design employees – Colin Anderson, Aaron Puzey, Stewart Graham and David Jones – it was created as an antidote to the technological arms race that existed at the time. Within a short timeframe, Gary Penn, the legendary *Zzap!64* reviewer and former editor of *The One*, also joined.

"With Denki, the idea was to make smaller games within a tighter production loop," he explains. "The scale they were aiming for didn't involve spending huge periods of time on a game and I guess, from my point of view, I didn't really need to be at DMA any more. I wasn't 19 years old and I didn't want to work like crazy."

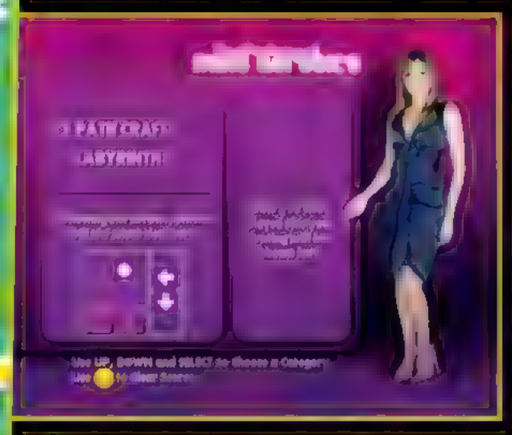
Each of the founders brought their own expertise to the table in audio, coding, design and business. David, in particular, was an entrepreneurial spirit, having cofounded DMA Design and created the Dundee studio of Rage Games – the latter working wonders for Denki. Rage published the developer's first title, *Denki Blocks!* in September 2001 for the Game Boy Advance and Game Boy Color. "David helped us by using his contacts which meant we were introduced to different people and were able to gain publishing deals from the start," Gary says.

Denki Blocks! was a simple puzzler that involved sliding blocks to make them stick together with the



»[Sky TV] *Dexter's Laboratory: Dexter Vs Mandark* saw players seeking to build gadgets to regain control of the lab.

»[Sky TV] *Caterpillar Crunch* was based on a familiar retro concept and had a great nostalgic vibe.



»[Sky TV] *Codename: Kids Next Door* was the interactive TV game of Cartoon Network's animated television series.

aim of connecting each colour set. The title won the ECTS Overall Best Game Of Show and Best Handheld Game in 2001 and the bods at the top of Rage Games were impressed. When it heard Sky was seeking decent developers for Gamestar, Rage put Denki in touch with the broadcaster. This led to a version of *Denki Blocks!* being made for the interactive service too.

Very quickly, Denki established a strict method of working that drew on Gary's magazine background. "We wanted to get into the mindset that development couldn't slip otherwise, like in publishing, the game just wouldn't come out," he says. "To make our games in the most efficient way possible, we created a role called 'product architect' which was kind of like being an editor on a magazine," Gary says. "It was similar to being a producer and designer with responsibility to contract out coding, graphics, music and so on, and it enabled us to create a process that we refined over many years."

Denki became a development machine, able to create titles in very short timeframes, and it

»[GBA] *Denki Blocks!* was the very first game from Denki and is a smart little take on the puzzle genre. It was also available on Game Boy Color, and later Sky Gamestar, PSP and mobile.

> "To make our games in the most efficient way possible, we created a role called 'product architect' which was kind of like being an editor on a magazine"
>
> Gary Penn

hit the ground running with a second original title in 2002 called *Go! Go! Beckham! Adventure On Soccer Island* which was also published by Rage for the GBA. "We had the [David] Beckham licence and thought we should try and do something with it while keeping things original but it was at a time when original games were finding it hard to get traction," he says. "Trouble is, we bit off more than we could chew with that one and it got very shallow very quickly. It does have a cult following but I don't understand why."

Shortly after, Rage hit trouble. It had suffered a bad run of sales – including those based on its David Beckham franchise and the publisher filed for bankruptcy in January 2003. *Denki Blocks!*, however, had been played a million times in six months on Sky Gamestar. Denki's future path appeared to be mapped.

In a short space of time, Denki had converted *Pac-Man*, *Bust-A-Move* and *Super Breakout* on behalf of Namco, Taito and Atari for Sky Gamestar. It went on to work with major franchises on games such as *Looney Tunes: Back In Action* and *Hulk* while releasing *Sky Sports Darts*, *Word Crunch*, *Caterpillar Crunch* and *Duopolis*.

There were tie-ins with TV channels such as Cartoon Network which led to *Tom And Jerry In Mouse Party*, *Courage The Cowardly Dog In Katz Komeback* and *Scooby-Doo In The Mystery Of Eerie Island* in 2004 among others. There was *Boggle*, *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Jumble Fever* and *The Grim Adventures Of Billy & Mandy* in 2005.

TIMELINE

2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2007
2008
2009
2010
2012
2014
2017
2019

> "They weren't games machines at all but it appealed to us to create small games on crappy tech like this because it was kind of interesting to work on"
> Gary Penn

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

GARY PENN

■ Gary remains the creative director at Denki and he works alongside Aaron Purzey, the company's technical director. Over the years, he has been a columnist for *Edge* magazine (between 2004 and 2006) and he also wrote the book *Sensible Software 1986-1999* for Read-Only Memory in 2013. He won the Games Media Legend award in 2007.

COLIN ANDERSON

■ After leaving his post as managing director of Denki in October 2017, Colin continued his role as a director of the games industry body TIGA until May 2018. He also became the chief commercial officer of Earthbound Games. In July 2019, he returned as a director of Denki and continues in that role today.

DAVID JONES

■ David Jones resigned as director of Denki in May 2018 around the same time as he sold the cloud-focused technology company Cloudgine (which he cofounded in 2012) to Epic Games. He also resigned from Reagent Games which he founded for the development of the Xbox One game *Crackdown 3*. Today he is director of cloud and esports strategies at Epic Games and is based in Edinburgh.

Shrek and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* featured in 2006. Denki even produced episodic games such as *Tomb Raider: The Reckoning*. "We ended up doing a load of stuff for Sky over quite a long time," Gary says, with great understatement.

Denki expanded, but not to the huge extent you may expect given its output. At its peak in 2008, it had just 20 staff, and yet it created an eye-watering 170 games. Each title would take between two and 12 weeks to create, with the shorter timescales reserved for the episodes. "If you were cynical, you'd say the episodes were reskins with some new stuff," Gary says. "But if you were into the game, they were great as you were getting a whole new title based on what you liked. So we had quite a few episodes for a few different brands. We also did a few set-top box games for DirecTV in California, coding in Dynamic HTML which was insanely hard."

Games needed to be made quickly in order to generate sufficient money – the revenues were tight on the interactive TV platforms so wasting time was not an option. Denki also had to bear its audience in mind: Sky Gamestar appeared to be a turn-off for teenage-to-mid-thirties men but popular among just about everyone else.

As such, the games needed to appeal to non-traditional gamers and be good enough to part folk with their money. A 'Star Day Pass' would cost £1.50, granting access to a selection of games all day and the trick was to hook people in.

In terms of production, it both helped and hindered that the boxes on which the games were played were just glorified set-top players. "They weren't games machines at all but it appealed to us to create small games on crappy tech like this because it was kind of interesting to work on," Gary explains. Denki believed it could make great games on any platform and it hooked into the mentality that small, solid teams could bring soul to a title.

»[Sky TV] *Foster's Home For Imaginary Friends* took place inside the rooms of a Victorian mansion.

Having a process solidly in place meant Denki didn't spend large amounts of time messing with gaming formulas. It also devised a set of rules called the 'Denki Difference' which encouraged developers to immediately run with an idea using familiar tools and practices rather than get bogged down with design documents.

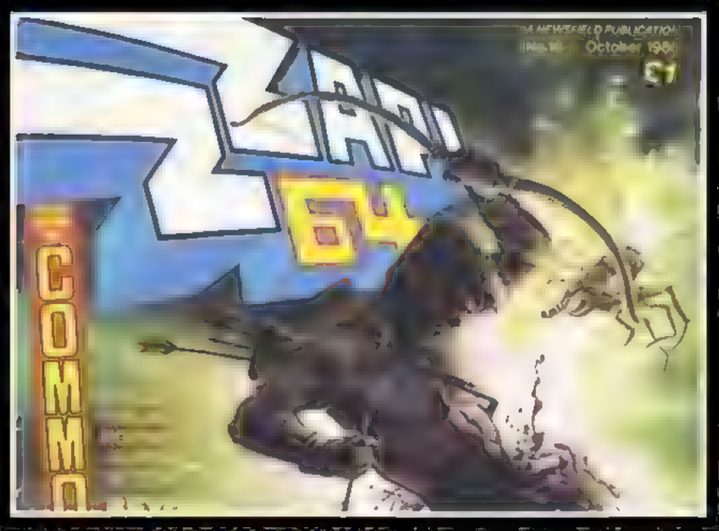
There was an insistence that games would feel good, draw on drama, make players feel alive, be convenient and have a twist that set them apart from rivals. Denki was also keen not to overburden its workers, dividing them into micro-teams with at least one artist and coder on each and restricting them to 9am-to-5pm days. "If you allow yourself to work too much overtime, then you don't end up working as efficiently and there's a risk of burning out," Gary explains.

Such an ethos helped to attract great talent including Gary Timmons who had created the original *Lemmings* animations and Richard Ralfe who had been a level designer and design coordinator at DMA Design. Colin would generally look after the audio and the teams would explore all sorts of technology. "We built

DNA OF DENKI

INTERACTIVE TELEVISION

■ For the majority of the Noughties, Denki concentrated on creating games for digital interactive television platforms, most notably Sky Gamestar which launched in 1999. By the middle of the decade, more than 50 million games had been played on the service in three million households, with Denki providing dozens of quality titles.



MAGAZINE PROCESSES

■ Gary Penn used his background as a magazine journalist and editor to help structure and streamline the game-making process. Working on the basis that if a magazine missed its deadlines, it wouldn't come out, he set out to bring order to development so that the Denki team wouldn't be constantly reinventing the wheel.

»[Sky TV] One of Denki's earliest titles for Sky Gamestar was based around the comic book character Hulk.

»[Sky TV] *Shrek The Third* was Denki's sixth *Shrek* game for Sky Games and it's 56th release for the platform.

»[Sky TV] *Star Trek: The Next Generation – Stranded* let players assume the role of Data.

a set of software libraries that could be reused and built upon." Gary says, with Denki also dividing development structured chunks so the first 40% of the time was pre-production, the second 20% focused on a second build and the final 40% dedicated to post-production.

The approach granted the team time. Not only was Denki working on a side-project throughout this period, it also branched into fresh areas, notably with the release of a game-based learning tool called InQuizitor which won an eLearning Award in 2007.

Still, Denki restructured and, in 2008, set up a new internal development team to create more original games. Led by Gary (with an external team headed by Richard), Denki intended to continue working on titles for digital services such as Sky Gamestar – which by now was going by the name Sky Games – while seeking new concepts and ideas across virtual consoles, PCs, handhelds, mobile phones and other gadgets.

The developer produced iOS games such as *Denki Blocks!*, *Juggle!* and *Big Cup Cricket* and titles for Xbox Live Arcade (*Juggle!* again). *Denki Blocks! Daily Workout* saw an outing on Facebook and, to keep the ideas flowing, Gary set up an internal initiative called 'Dragon's Denki' loosely based on the television show. *Dragon's Den*. "Our developers would pitch a gaming idea and ask for time to do it," says Gary. "*Quarrel* came out of that and it was Richard's idea."

Quarrel was a word-based strategy game prototyped by creating a board game version during pre-production but Denki struggled to find a publisher for it. It led to the shedding of most of Denki's staff in 2010 and a decision to self-publish as many games as possible in the future. Although *Quarrel* was eventually released on iOS and it got its outing on Xbox Live Arcade in 2011 thanks to UTV Ignition Entertainment but the developer became far less prolific in its second decade.

Denki made browser-based games using HTML5 such as *Save The Day, Denki Word Quest!*, as well as another version of *Denki Blocks!* and *Monster Force*. It also made games such as *Bips!* for Facebook and worked with the BBC in 2014 on *Over The Place: Australia*. But that year, Denki moved towards longer term projects.

It ended up working on *Crackdown 3* ("I can't believe I went on to that," Gary says, of the game that was released in 2019 after a lengthy period of development time). But, in 2016, Denki also began work on a game called *Autonauts*, a fun blast about colonising new worlds and robot automation.

With just Gary and Aaron effectively working at Denki, the company had sought to raise money for the game on Kickstarter in 2017, generating just £8,616 of their £40,000 goal. Perseverance won, however, and the game was eventually released in late 2019, reviewing very well. It's set to dominate Denki's agenda for some time to come. "*Autonauts* has loads of potential; there's so much we can do with it and lots of games we can make with that core," Gary says. "I'd be happy to work on that [for] forever to a certain extent." ✱

CASUAL GAMES

■ Denki wanted to move away from the growing trend of taking years to make a single game by evoking the spirit of the Eighties with 180 accessible, easy-to-play games created in its first decade. Colourful and cheerful, it drew on big-name brands and familiar gameplay – puzzle games and platformers were prevalent.

THE SCOTTISH SCENE

■ From 1988, DMA Design effectively created a gaming hub in Dundee, attracting talent from across the world. Denki's cofounders were drawn from that company, and they helped establish the new developer as key part of the Scottish scene, picking up top talent that would go on to compete internally by pitching original ideas.

SMALL WITH BIG IDEAS

■ There may have only been 20 people at Denki at the turn of the Tens (down to just two today), but there's no faulting the company's ambition. Rather than concentrate on graphics, Denki has placed a greater emphasis on interface and interaction over the years. Its latest game, *Autonauts*, is inventive and charming.

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

Info

- **Featured System:** Wii
- **Year:** 2009
- **Developer:** Visceral Games/Eurocom
- **Key People:** Wright Bagwell, Jonathan Hackett

Go Deeper

» The *Dead Space* franchise started off as *System Shock 3*. The release of *Resident Evil 4* caused Visceral to have a drastic rethink.

» The first letter from each of *Extraction*'s ten chapters reveals an important clue about one of the characters featured in the game.

» [Wii] It's not a pure shooter like *Virtua Cop*, but you'll still find plenty of testing scenarios in *Extraction*.

Nintendo's Wii might be best associated with the casual market and was seen as 'child friendly', but this chilling horror shooter from 2009 certainly wasn't suitable for kids

Words by Darran Jones

DEAD SPACE: EXTRACTION

THE BACKGROUND

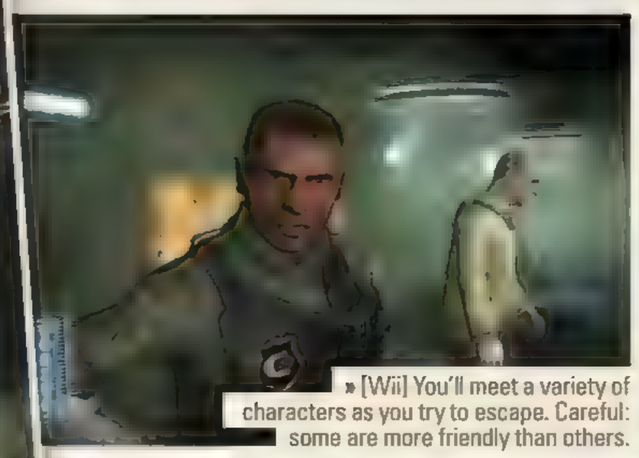
Revisiting *Dead Space*'s launch reveals just how much faith Electronic Arts had in its new franchise. To drum up interest ahead of the game's October 2008 release, the publisher debuted a comic prequel series in March. This set up the events of *Dead Space: Downfall*, an animated movie which came out mere weeks after the game's launch. This was another prequel which concluded with *Dead Space*'s Isaac Clarke's arrival at the doomed USG Ishimura. Keen to add further lore to its new franchise, EA announced *yet another* prequel, this time a spin-off Wii game called *Dead Space: Extraction* in April 2009 – four months ahead of its September 2009 release date. It was clear that the publisher was out for blood.

THE GAME

Extraction's development, like *Dead Space*'s, was handled by Visceral Games, with additional help from Eurocom. Realising that a straight port of *Dead Space*'s design would be unsuitable for Nintendo's unique console, the devs instead played to the system's strengths, and that meant motion controls made up a big part of *Extraction*'s mechanics.

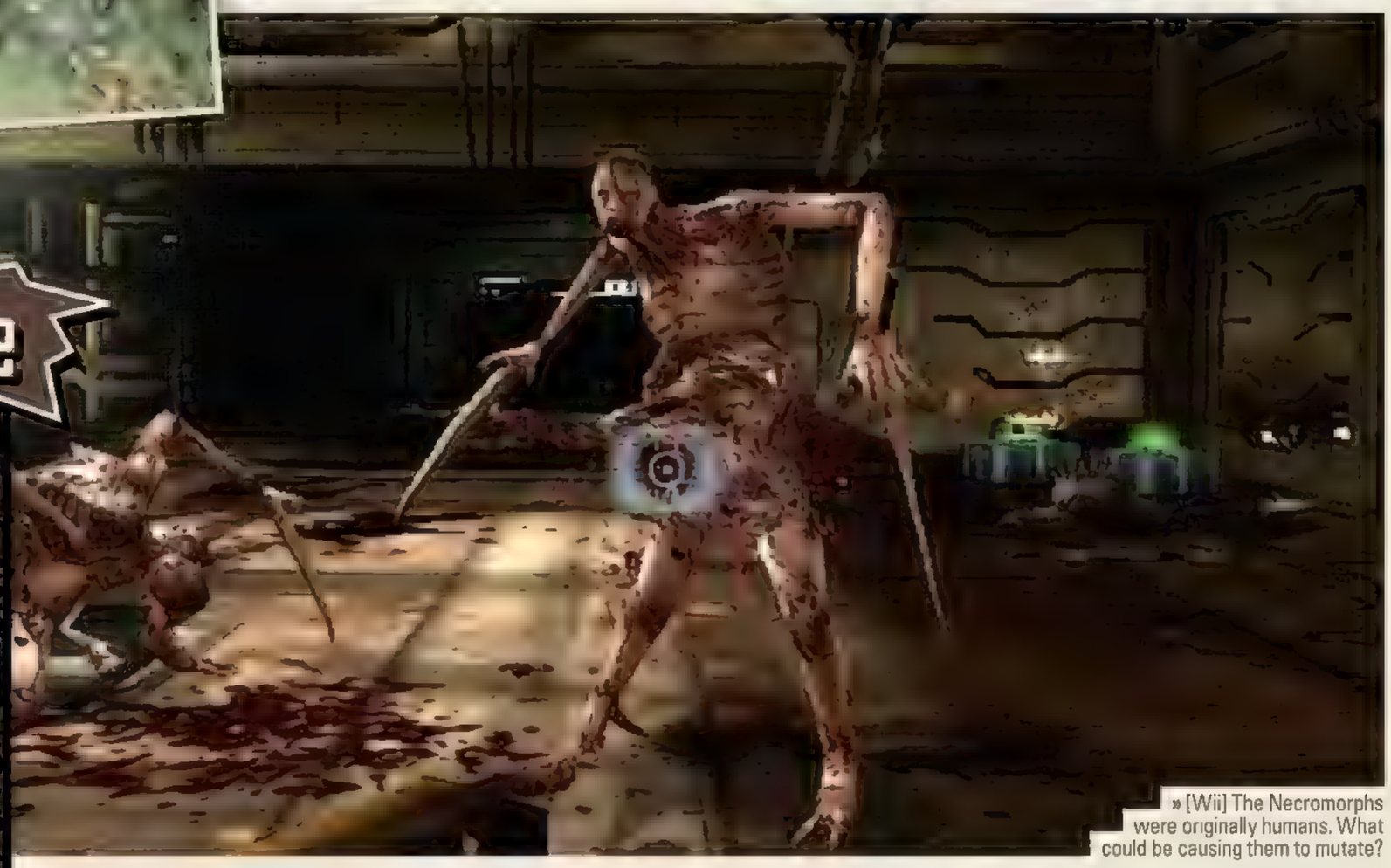
Rather than *Dead Space*'s *Resident Evil 4*-style third-person viewpoint, *Extraction* instead utilises a first-person perspective and is effectively an on-rails lightgun shooter, sharing similarities with Capcom's Wii release *Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles*. While it features plenty of shooting, narrative is the focus of Visceral's shooter, and in this aspect it excels as it both outstrips the solid script of *Dead Space* and gives you further insight into how Isaac Clarke's grisly adventure became such a horrific nightmare. While *Extraction* does work as a standalone game, it's ultimately a companion piece for fans of the original sci-fi survival-horror, answering some of the questions that would have

» [Wii] There's a range of scary Necromorphs to contend with in *Extraction*. Don't worry, they're easy to dismember.



» [Wii] You'll meet a variety of characters as you try to escape. Careful: some are more friendly than others.

» [Wii] *Extraction* isn't the jumpiest of games, but there's a surprising amount of gore in it.



» [Wii] The Necromorphs were originally humans. What could be causing them to mutate?

Things of note

ENHANCED EXTRACTION

PS3 owners were able to enjoy a graphically enhanced, Move-compatible version of *Extraction* if they purchased the Limited Edition version of *Dead Space 2*. It was later released digitally.

FURTHER READING

Image Comics released a 32-page comic based on *Extraction* in September, alongside the game's release. Unlike the game, it focuses on Nicole Brennan, who had already appeared as a character in *Dead Space*.

WEAPON EX

There's a solid range of useful weapons in *Extraction*, including a few new ones. They're not as heavily customisable as the ones found in *Dead Space*, though.

DEAD DUO

One of the great aspects of *Extraction* is the ability for a second player to drop in and help at any time. It certainly makes things a lot easier, and a little less scarier.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Although *Extraction*'s HUD isn't quite as effective as *Dead Space*'s, it's still fairly clean, allowing you to focus on the horrific action that unfolds through play.

come from playing through *Dead Space*, while presenting plenty of its own.

One of the strengths of *Extraction* is that its story is told from the viewpoint of several characters, including Sam Caldwell, a member of the mining team that retrieves a mysterious artefact known only as 'The Marker', to detective Nathan McNeill and doctor Catherine Howell. It's a solid way of unfolding the plot, particularly as not everyone manages to escape the carnage they find themselves in, so you never know who's really 'safe'. Central to *Extraction*'s plot is Lexine Weller, the girlfriend of Sam, who proves to be a critical part of the story. As with *Dead Space*, *Extraction*'s story is further enhanced by the collecting of logs that come in written, audio and video forms. In a nice touch, audio logs play through the Wiimote's speaker, adding more atmosphere to Visceral's macabre classic.

Despite its commendable focus on being story-driven, Visceral still realised the strength of solid game design and crammed *Extraction* full of satisfying mechanics; this is most notable when it comes to the excellent gunplay. Regardless of which character you play as, you'll often be in control of the same weapons that featured so predominately in *Dead Space*. Favourites like the versatile Plasma Cutter and flamethrower return – along with newcomers such as the P-Sec Pistol – and you'll have to focus on dismembering your foes just like in the original game. In a neat touch, the weapons' secondary fire modes remain, cleverly activated by turning the Wiimote on its side. Key *Dead Space* abilities such as Stasis and Kinesis also return as well, and work extremely well with the new first-person perspective.

In addition to handling most of the game's combat, the Wiimote also activates *Extraction*'s 'Glow Worm' – a light source the characters use to navigate the dark corridors of the Ishimura which can be recharged with a shake of the stick. Controls aren't entirely Wiimote-based however, with the Nunchuck add-on being used for crucial melee attacks, or to frantically shake off any enemies that have latched onto you. The beauty of these many mechanics and flourishes is that they genuinely enhance *Extraction*'s atmosphere, rather than turning it into just another 'Wii waggle game'.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

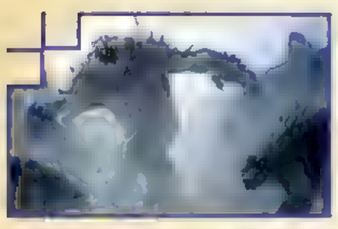
Dead Space: Extraction may not be the first lightgun-style game to have a heavy emphasis on story-focused play, but it's certainly one of the best available and the last 11 years has done nothing to diminish its impact within the genre. It's a shining example of a team of developers being well aware of a system's shortcomings, and doing everything they can to ensure they instead play to its strengths. It's highly possible that the Wii could have handled a game like *Dead Space*, but it's also obvious that it would have been compromised in ways outside of just having lower graphical fidelity. *Extraction* might not break new boundaries or remould its genre like some of the games we've featured within this section, but what it does do is deliver an absorbing, highly satisfying adventure that becomes almost impossible to put down. *

THE MAKING OF

CLAW

In the mid-Nineties, as PC gaming entered a bold new, 3D era, cutting-edge startup Monolith Productions went against the grain, determined to create the perfect 2D sidescroller. The developers spent so long on their masterpiece that by the time of its release, the world had moved on

Words by Hareth Al Bustani



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BLOOD
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1997

SHOGO: MOBILE ARMOR DIVISION
SYSTEM: PC, AMIGA
YEAR: 1998

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, PS3, PS4, XBOX 360, XBOX ONE
YEAR: 2014

In 1994, as *Doom* took the world by storm, Windows 95 emerged with the promise of a glorious new era of PC gaming. While most developers hurled all their resources into churning out '*Doom* clones', a small startup operating out of Kirkland, Washington, did something else entirely. It took two steps into the future, and one into the past – harnessing the full power of cutting-edge Microsoft DirectX technology, and using it to breathe new life into the world of 2D platforming.

Monolith Productions' first big break came in the form of the inauspiciously titled *Games Sampler 2* for Windows 95. Cofounder Brian Goble recalls, "There was an underground team at Microsoft that was making gaming technology for Windows, and they wanted to get everyone excited about it, so they came up with the *Sampler* CD – which was basically a bunch of demos from other publishers." Though the company was young, it had already developed a stellar 3D engine for Windows, which the team used to build a virtual world for the *Sampler* CD. "The user could go into the world, go into a room, see the game demos and launch them from within the world." The project not only demonstrated Monolith's mastery of DirectX but introduced it to a huge number of publishers – and Microsoft kept sending people the studio's way.

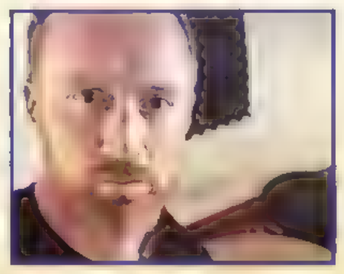
Buoyed by the success, Brian felt it was time for the startup to develop its own flagship game, and he knew exactly where to start. Before Monolith, he had been a programmer at educational software company Edmark, where he worked with artist and Monolith cofounder Garett Price on an animated dragon. "As soon as I saw it, I was like, 'Oh, we've got to make it breathe fire,'" he remembers. Though they worked on opposite sides of the building, bound by mutual enthusiasm, they struck up a friendship, and Garret shared his portfolio. Among the most curious illustrations were those of a pirate cat, called Nathaniel J Claw.

Garrett first developed the Captain Claw concept in art school. "He's a bit of a loner, and an action-oriented leader that his crew loves and will follow anywhere," he says. "He may do a few bad things now and then, but probably feels like he's doing them for the right reasons." While Claw was not based on one particular pirate, Garret tells us, "If I was pressed on the issue, I'd say probably someone like Captain Kidd." On the contrary,

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
- **DEVELOPER:** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
- **RELEASED:** 1997
- **PLATFORM:** PC
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

» Brian Goble was one of the cofounders of Monolith Productions. He left the company in 2002.



» After *Claw*, Chris Hewett worked on the acclaimed horror shooter *FEAR* as executive producer.

» [PC] While still working as a Boeing flight test engineer, Chris Hewett says designing the vine-swinging sections of the Dark Forest was great fun.

Garrett drew inspiration from the most unexpected of places – the pirate fashion of new wave band Adam And The Ants, and the animated film, *The Secret Of Nimh*, featuring sword-wielding anthropomorphic rodents.

Brian, who always dreamed of developing a side-scroller, had already created a 2D scrolling engine for his game *The Adventures Of MicroMan*. For all the hype, the tide had yet to turn in favour of the emerging 3D revolution, and the 2D platformer *Jazz Jackrabbit* side-scroller had just proved the genre could work on PC. Brian says, "DirectX had just come out and one of the demos was this really cool parallax side-scrolling demo called *FoxBear*. You just couldn't do that in Windows prior to that."

As Brian busied himself building the engine, Monolith began bringing in new talent, even hiring a team of ex-Disney animators to produce 23 minutes of cutscenes. At a time where fullscreen animation itself was rare, it was a novel move – accompanied by an orchestral score, and a cast of voice actors that included some members of the team and their families. The story revolved around Captain Claw, who winds up imprisoned after his crew is attacked by the Cocker-Spaniards. In his dungeon, he finds a treasure map, indicating the locations of the various parts of the mythical Amulet Of Nine Lives – which grants its wearer immortality. Breaking free, Claw embarks upon a quest to rescue his crew and secure the amulet before his rival, the lion Red Tail.

Captain Nathaniel J Claw

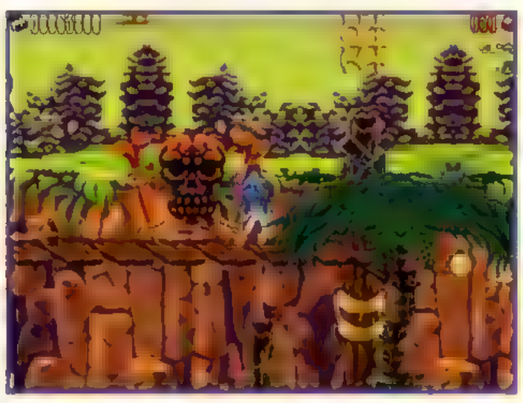
Nathaniel J Claw is a sarcastic yet warmhearted, feline pirate – a misunderstood hero, who despite his profession, always does the right thing. Despite being a bit of a loner, he inspires honour and bravado amongst his men, who would follow him to the grave if need be. Likes catnip.

Each level is fraught with violent enemies and perils, such as moving platforms and crumbling bricks, fatal spiked pits and hot tar. Claw himself is armed with a sword, gun, stock of dynamite and magic claw, which fires off into the distance somewhat like a hadoken. He can also throw his enemies to their demise. Along the way, he discovers time-limited special powers, such as lightning, fire and ice swords, obliterating all enemies in his path. Many of the levels culminate in a boss fight, each requiring a different strategy to overcome.

Among those to be brought in was Brian's family friend Chris Hewett – who was working as a flight test engineer at Boeing. Though he had designed some levels for *Wolfenstein*, he was new to programming and working at a gaming company still felt like a pipe dream. He asked Brian, "What do I have to do to become a programmer? I'll do anything – I'll take out the trash." After spending a day familiarising himself with Brian's level editor, he went away and produced a design for the first dungeon stage on a dot matrix printer – a savvy move that earned him a part-time job, and a further 20 hours on top of his 60-hour work week.

Although Monolith had begun working on a *Doom*-like FPS, *Blood*, Chris was impressed by the way *Claw* paired an 'old-school' genre with intricate design, a rich story, high colour artwork, parallaxing ▶

» Garrett Price first came up with the *Claw* concept at art school, originally envisioning it as a comic, graphic novel or illustrated book.

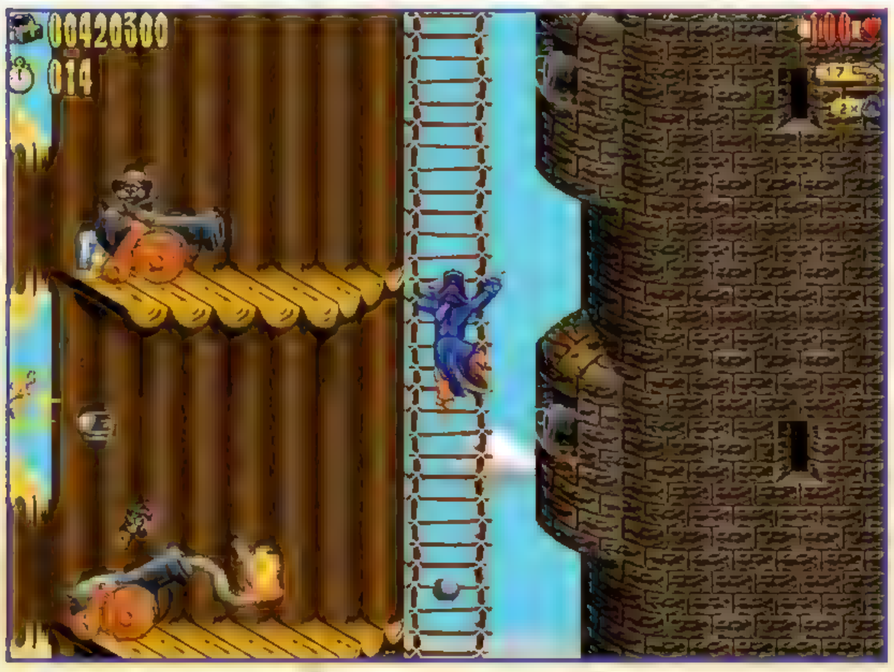


"Claw is a bit of a loner, and an action-oriented leader that his crew loves and will follow anywhere. He may do a few bad things now and then, but probably feels like he's doing them for the right reasons"

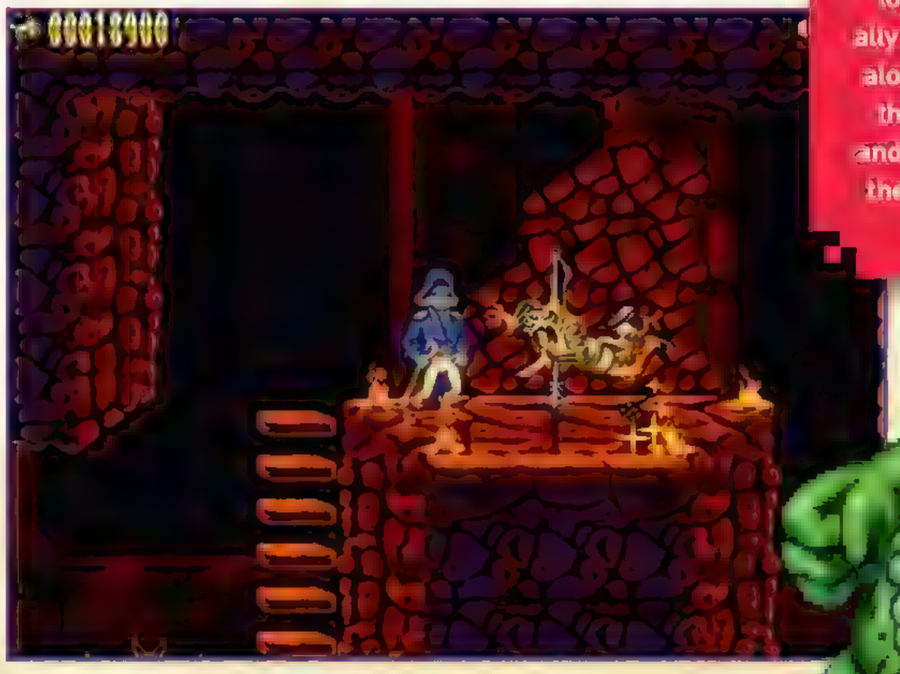
Garett Price

Mr Tabby

Captain Claw's first mate is a loyal, intelligent and powerful ally to his team, but he's captured alongside the rest of the crew at the beginning of the game. He and Claw are later reunited when the latter rescues his men from beneath Pirate Cove.



» [PC] *Claw* increasingly scales up the difficulty as the game progresses, and timing soon becomes crucial to survival.



» [PC] Though earlier NPCs are relatively easy to dispatch, the stripy residents of Tiger Island are not to be trifled with.

De-Clawed

The sequel that never was

At the end of the game, *Claw* obtains the Amulet Of Nine Lives – granting him immortality. Creator Garrett Price says, "I'm not really sure what Claw would have done afterwards, but I imagine he would have had adventures with his crew, where he could probably take a few more risks."

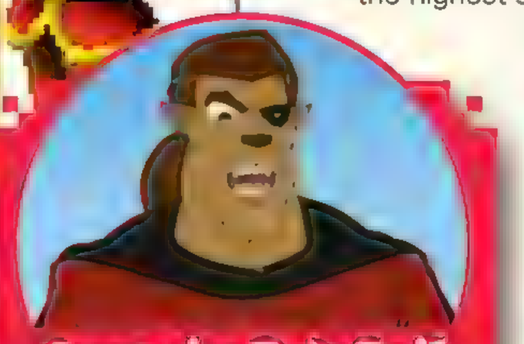
With the public clamouring for 3D games, the team originally planned to create a 3D sequel using its LithTech engine. "The high-level idea was to have Claw grappling with different parts of his personality, in a 'Jekyll and Hyde' type of way, as a result of a curse brought about by stealing an artefact from a sea cave."

There would be multiple versions of Claw, which the 3D engine would allow the player to shapeshift between, to suit the task at hand. "There was a brutish version that was incredibly strong but had limited dexterity, a physically weaker version that had higher intelligence and so could use tools, and a kitten version that was very fast but was easily frightened."

Although this new dimension opened *Claw* up to "a ton of gameplay possibilities", the team never found the right publisher, and the project was later dropped. *Claw*'s Polish publisher, Techland, was rumoured to be developing a sequel, but ended up releasing *Nikita: The Mystery Of the Hidden Treasure* in 2009 instead.

"It was a really tight group – so different from nowadays, where game teams are huge. We had a lot more say"

Chris Hewett



Captain Red Tail

Claw's nemesis is a megalomaniacal, Machiavellian lion with one eye who refers to himself as "a leader, a visionary, a survivor". Holding two gems, he seems to boast supernatural powers, hurtling not just daggers but the wind itself at Claw, attempting to blow him into a wall of stakes. Notoriously sneaky.

» [PC] Sometimes, there's nothing more satisfying than simply chucking your enemy off a cliff.

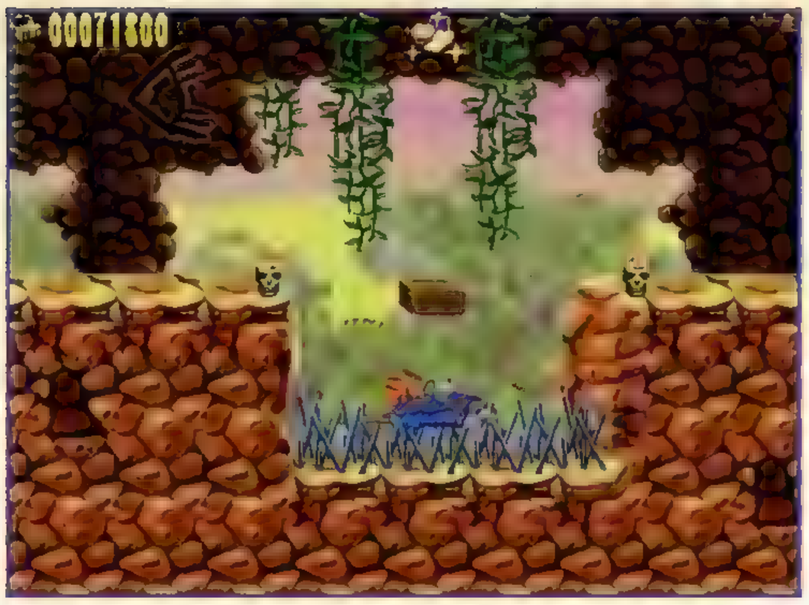
» [PC] Each level was designed not only with its own colour palette, but pitfalls, traps and enemies too.

▶ and, of course, cutscenes. Once the levels began to come together, they were designed to flow from one cutscene to the next, linking the entire game into one immersive storyline. The tone is infused with humour at every turn, with voices calling out: "Will work for catnip!" That intoxicating flower also serves as a power-up, allowing Claw to run faster, jump higher and inflict more damage.

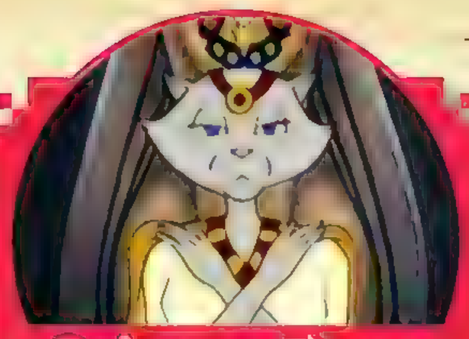
Chris says, "It was a really tight group – so different from nowadays, where game teams are huge. We had a lot more say." Brian was always happy to build new features into the engine – the aim was to make the game as perfect as possible. Having secured investment from a variety of sources, neither time nor money were issues. "When you have a publisher, you have deadlines, and you have to submit milestones, or you won't get your payment," Brian highlights. "We didn't have that, so we would just polish and polish. If something didn't look or feel right, we would fix it, and that just became how we operated."

As a level designer, Chris aimed to craft a basic path for each level, and then design a series of more complicated branches, for hardcore gamers who wanted to collect all the items and reach the highest scores. He adds, "Each level required a whole new set of assets and characters, and so for the amount of time that we spent on it, we really wanted to make that level as fun as possible for those who wanted that extra challenge."

At the time, graphics card capabilities fluctuated wildly, and to ensure a streamlined performance, the team decided to use 8-bit colours. "Doing higher 16-bit or even 24-bit," Brian contends, "was not that common, due to memory – 8-bit images took less memory, so we could get more up on the card." Although this meant that at any given time, the game could only display a palette of 256 colours,



» [PC] Utilising DirectInput, *Claw*'s controls are brilliant, but one misstep is often the difference between life and death.



Princess Adora

After defeating Lord Omar, captain of the Royal Tiger Guard, Claw meets Princess Adora, who commends him on his quest. Deeming him worthy of the title, 'Champion Of All Cats', she presents him with the Amulet Of Nine Lives, beseeching him: "Guard it with your life and it will serve you forever."

» [PC] On the way into Tiger Island, Claw encounters a downright bizarre cast of characters, who, when killed, announce, "I seem to be deceased."

each level of *Claw* had its own custom palette – a time-consuming, yet ingenious, move that allowed the game to feature a striking array of visuals, while retaining optimum performance across the board.

Levels consistently introduced not only more difficult enemies and traps, but new power-ups and mechanics – encouraging players to use them in creative ways. Listening exclusively to 2Pac and Snoop Dogg, Chris spent every spare minute working on the game – whether that meant tapping away on his laptop while his Boeing colleagues were lounging round the pool, or, sometimes, sleeping under his desk. "I liked working on the Dungeon level, because as the first level, it was one that everyone needed to play, but the Dark Forest was also really fun, because of the vines," he tells us.

When Chris first joined Monolith, *Claw*'s level editor was a tedious beast – one that required him to draw each tile one by one. However, it eventually became so powerful that it was released with the game – allowing gamers themselves to design and share their own levels online. Brian's commitment to the community, personally responding to every letter sent in, culminated in an audacious multiplayer component, which would allow 64 players to race one another through the stages. "That came out of Microsoft's DirectPlay networking component," says Brian – who opted to push for the maximum number of players possible. "Back then, latency and networking just wasn't what it is today. It was crazy – we didn't even have 64 people in the company when we were first designing that feature."

Driven by a spirit of perfectionism, Brian says the game "ballooned way too big, way too ambitious and took way longer than we ever anticipated". When the company struck a deal with Creative Labs, which wanted to use its cinematic cutscenes to demonstrate the capabilities of the company's new DVD drive, suddenly there was a change of pace. Finally, a staggering two and a half years into development, the game was pushed past the finish line, polished and released. Critics hailed it as the finest PC side-scroller ever – reserving special praise for the game's DirectInput controls, engine, level design, smooth difficulty curve, graphics, sound and cinematic cutscenes. The only criticism was that the came was simply too hard – which the team put out a patch to correct.

» [PC] Among the most powerful tools in Claw's arsenal is the Magic Claw, which functions somewhat like a hadoken from *Street Fighter*.

More crucially, in the colossal time it had taken to perfect the title, the tide had changed. Now, 3D gaming was all the rage, and despite a cult following that continues to this day, *Claw* was not a commercial hit, especially given how much money and time was spent on it. "By the end of the project, I think we had more than 40 people, which was huge at that time – all the art was hand-drawn and hand-animated and we even had a classic cel animator on the team," says Brian. Later on, the company experimented with self-publishing, which became a "very expensive lesson in why publishing is super difficult". However, *Claw* had not only lured in some brilliant talent, but established a technological foundation and fanbase, which Monolith took from strength to strength – which led to the studio being acquired by Warner Bros in 2004 and growing into a triple-A company.

Looking back, Brian remembers when the *Claw* team had grown in size and enthusiasm, someone suggested getting T-shirts made. "We got a ton made, and we got some for the development team, but we were so busy that nobody noticed that whoever put in the order spelled it 'devlopement'. We all just started wearing them as an internal joke." Jokes aside, Brian wore his until it fell apart. "We were proud." ✱

Le Rauxe

A French dog in the service of the Cocker-Spaniards, who captures Claw at the start of the game and has him sent to the prison of La Roca. He serves as the game's first, and least capable, boss – engaging Claw in a sword fight.

» [PC] Each stage culminates in a boss fight, requiring different strategies to overcome.

Game Boy Player Compatible Digital Controller

» **PLATFORM:** GameCube » **RELEASED:** 2003
» **COST:** ¥1,620 (launch), £100+ (today, boxed/unboxed)

This controller, manufactured by peripheral specialist Hori, is a great example of how a product can find a receptive audience by accident rather than design.

As the name suggests, this pad was intended for use with the Game Boy Player, Nintendo's official GameCube add-on for playing Game Boy games on the TV. To make it more suitable for that purpose, Hori imitated the SNES controller's form factor and dropped the analogue features from the official GameCube controller, removing the sticks and replacing the shoulder buttons with digital ones. The Z button was also relocated to the face of the controller.

Though the joypad was designed to support the many 2D games of the Game Boy library, it also proved popular with players who didn't own the Game Boy Player. The official GameCube controller was ill-suited to games of certain genres, particularly fighting games, while Hori's alternative fared considerably better due to its larger d-pad and more immediate shoulder button response. As a result, many enthusiasts opted to import the controller from Japan. It has remained a popular device – so much so that it now sells for considerably more than its original asking price, both at home and outside of Japan.

ESSENTIAL GAME
SOULCALIBUR II

When Namco's weapon-wielding warriors made the journey from the arcade to home consoles, the Nintendo version had a clear advantage over the PS2 and Xbox versions – compared to Heihachi Mishima and Spawn, Link is the best guest fighter. But multiplatform releases were often a little trickier on the GameCube thanks to its idiosyncratic controller, and it did slightly mar the *Soulcalibur II* experience due to its tiny d-pad. Hori's Game Boy Player controller mitigates this problem by making the d-pad the primary directional input, though the main face buttons are left unchanged, and the irregular shapes and asymmetrical placement may not be to everyone's tastes.

Game Boy Player Compatible Digital Controller fact

In an amusing twist, Hori later manufactured a replica of the official GameCube controller for the Nintendo Switch, to satisfy *Super Smash Bros* fans who couldn't hack anything other than the unusual GameCube layout.

» [PC] Soldiers will follow tracks left by your troops, but the Green Beret is undetectable when he buries himself in snow.

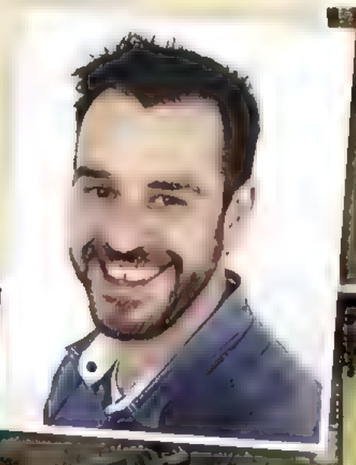
28N

CONFIDENTIAL

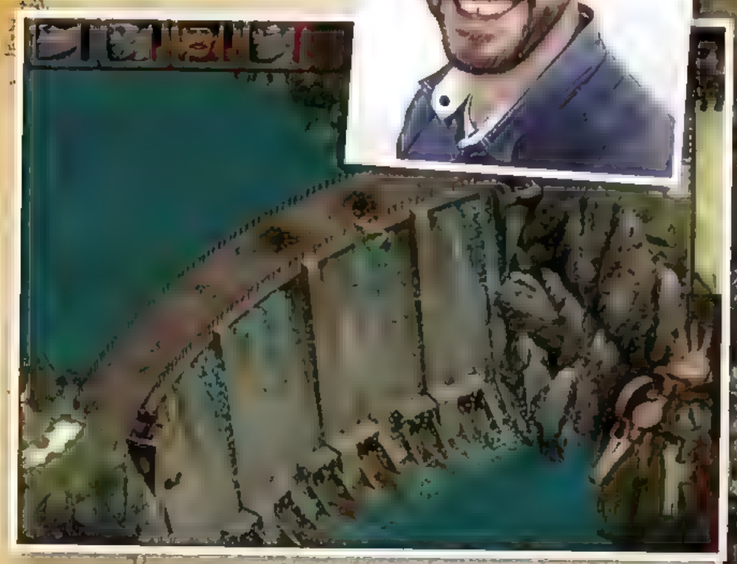
THE HISTORY OF COMMANDOS

CLICK. CLICK. "YES, SIR." CLICK. CLICK. CTRL + S. CLICK. CLICK. "I'LL BE RIGHT THERE." CLICK. CLICK. CTRL + S. CLICK. "HUH, WISH I COULD DO DAT." CLICK. "ALARM! ALARM!" SIRENS. SOUNDS OF GUNFIRE. ARGH! OKAY, ONE MORE GO...

WORDS BY LEWIS PACKWOOD



» Jon Beltrán De Heredia is currently working on Katoid (katoid.com), an innovative game analytics project.



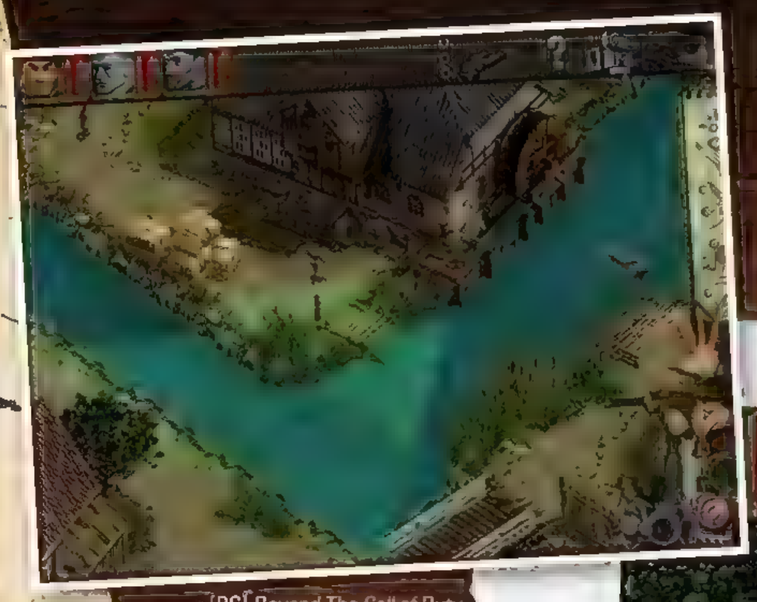
» [PC] The third level of *Behind Enemy Lines* sees you tasked with blowing up this dam, although sadly no bouncing bombs or gruff airmen are involved.

» [PC] You can split the screen multiple times in *Behind Enemy Lines* to give orders to different groups of commandos at the same time.

» [PC] This is an ideal time for the Spy to distract the guard while the Sapper sneaks up and nicks these explosives.

» [PC] This gunboat will mow down your troops in seconds – best to stay well hidden until it passes.

» Javier Arevalo stayed on at Pyro Studios for many years after *Commandos 2*, but eventually left to join the English-teaching company Lingokids.

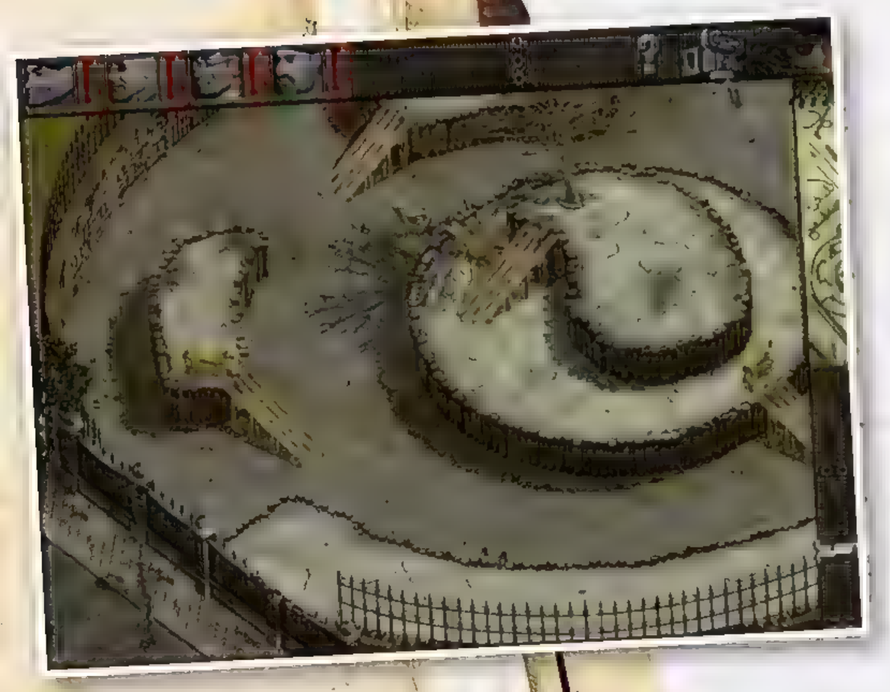


[PC] *Beyond The Call of Duty* introduced several new abilities, like being able to lob a stone to distract guards.

[PC] This mission from *Beyond The Call Of Duty* tasked you with blowing up experimental German jet planes.

» [PC] This impressive mansion appears on one of the hardest levels of *Beyond The Call Of Duty*, where you must kidnap a German officer without detection.

» Manuel Mendiluce went on to become a level designer at Pyro Studios, and is now a senior level designer on CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077*.



» [PC] The level of detail and variety of missions on *Beyond The Call Of Duty* was seriously impressive, like these beautiful ruins.

"At the time, there wasn't anything like Pyro Studios," says Javier Arévalo. "Pyro was created with the goal of making games that would be sold everywhere around the world." Plenty of developers in Nineties Spain were producing games for the domestic market, and some of these games eventually went on to international success. But Pyro, the Madrid-based studio behind the *Commandos* games, was founded in 1996 with an international outlook from the start. "It was the first time that the exclusive goal [was] making games not just to sell first in Spain and then elsewhere," says Javier, who was technology lead on the first three entries in the *Commandos* series.

When it came to deciding on the studio's crucial first game, there were a number of contenders, recalls Jon Beltrán De Heredia, lead programmer on *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines*, *Commandos: Beyond The Call Of Duty* and *Commandos 2: Men Of Courage*. "They were actually working on three separate projects," he says. "There was a World War 2 game, which would become *Commandos*, and there was also a pirates game – I don't think it had a name, *'Corsairs'* maybe. And there was a third game, which was not as well defined – it was a *Conan The Barbarian* kind of universe.

"So the *Commandos* prototype had a lot more work put in than the others, then they went to pitch the games to several publishers in the UK, and Eidos, on some whim, decided to buy the rights to *Commandos*, which was the one they really liked. I think Ian Livingstone was a key figure deciding to buy into the project."

Javier reckons it was the uniqueness of *Commandos* that piqued Eidos' interest: "I imagine that the difficulty to categorize *Commandos* was one of the things that they saw as a potential strength."

And *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines* really was a strange beast back then: it was nothing like a hex-based war game, but neither was it anything like the real-time strategy games of the day. And its stunningly detailed graphics were a cut above. "The way it played or felt was very unique," says Jon. "Back then, *Command & Conquer* existed already, but it was a lot less detailed – I mean, obviously, it's a different genre, it's an RTS, but it didn't give you this feeling [...] like, wow, this is like a lead model figure brought to life. It felt like a little world that was alive."

The developers dubbed it 'real-time tactics', and Jon cites the tiny soldiers of Sensible Software's *Cannon Fodder* as an inspiration, along with *The Lost Vikings*, an early title from Blizzard Entertainment (then known as Silicon & Synapse). In Blizzard's game, the player has to switch between three characters with unique abilities to complete a level, and Pyro's offering uses a similar mechanic, demanding that the player utilises each of the commandos' individual skills.

Another huge inspiration was WW2 movies of the Sixties and Seventies, highlights Javier, mentioning films like *The Guns Of Navarone*, *The Bridge On The River Kwai*, *The Eagle Has Landed*, *The Dirty Dozen* and *Kelly's Heroes*. "That was our biggest inspiration," he says. "And that was something that the creative director [Gonzalo 'Gonzo' Suárez] always pushed for, like this has to remind you of those movies."

In terms of actual game design, Javier reckons that the *Commandos* secret sauce was a mixture of set ▶

BACK TO THE BATTLEFIELD

HOW KALYPSO REDEPLOYED COMMANDOS

In July 2018, Kalypso Media, publisher of the *Tropico* games, bought the rights to the *Commandos* series. Since then, it has been busy remastering *Commandos 2*, and the new HD version should be out on PC by the time you read this. Plus, there's talk of more *Commandos* games to come.

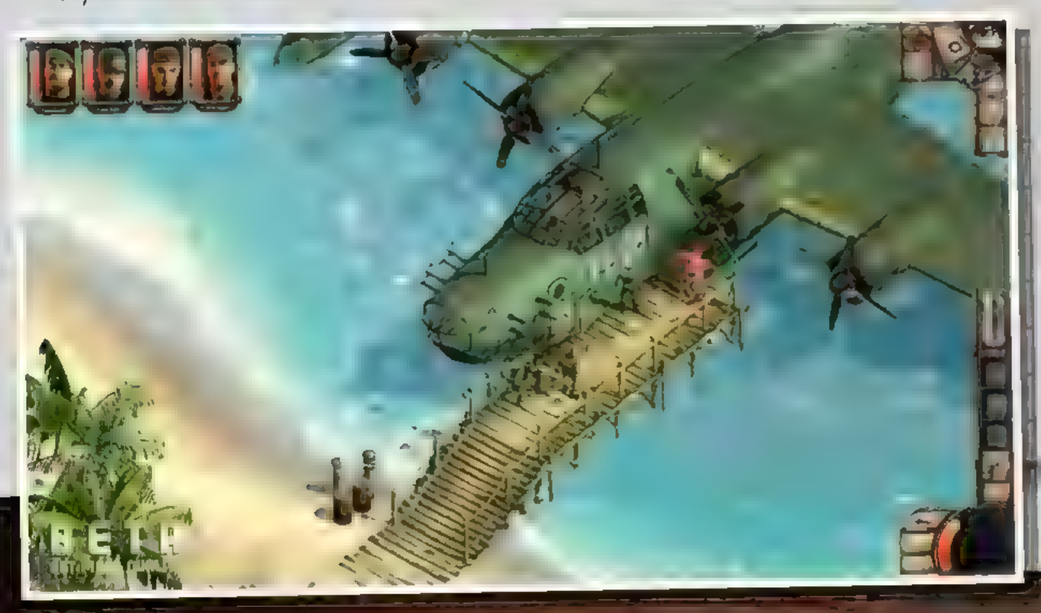
Marco Pacifico joined Kalypso in November 2018 and has been producing the *Commandos 2* remaster, something he's particularly happy about. "*Commandos* has always been one of my favourite games of all time!" he says. "It is one of the reasons, among others, [I decided] to join the Kalypso family. The expectations on the *Commandos* IP, not limited just to this remaster, are high for me, and I'm proud to be working on such a masterpiece."

Commandos 2 – HD Remaster is based on the original assets and source code from Pyro Studios, but has been completely rebuilt using Unity. "The reason behind this decision was to get the most out of modern rendering technologies such as dynamic lighting, shadows, multiple shader effects and spectacular particles," says Marco. "We are very happy with the results. Unity also enables us to streamline development on multiple platforms, allowing us to widen the range of platforms the game will be released to." In addition to the PC release, versions are planned for Mac, Switch, PS4 and Xbox One.

Marco says that the beautiful backdrops of *Commandos 2* have aged well: "Even today, after so many years, the graphics still look impressive." Nevertheless, his team has tried to improve the fidelity of the graphics. "We have been working hard to scale up the prerendered backgrounds using powerful AI algorithms, while recreating 3D models that reflect the original game. The result is on par with the original game and I'm sure that players will enjoy the modern look and more detailed 3D models."

Aside from the updated graphics, Marco says that there are very few new additions to the HD remaster. "Our goal was to stay faithful to the original and not to make any changes to the gameplay and the overall feeling of the game," he explains. "This means that we didn't add new features, except for a reworked joypad support that reflects modern standards and features a revisited UI, plus a 'hint system' to better support onboarding of new players."

So, will we be seeing more remasters of *Commandos* games? "There's no official plan about remastering other games of the original series," says Marco, "but we are not excluding any option for the future." Still, there are definitely new *Commandos* games on the way: Kalypso has just opened a studio in Germany that's dedicated to the development of a new games in the series, and Marco says that the publisher is looking into the possibility of getting former members of Pyro Studios involved in a sequel. Exciting times!



» [PC] The first level of *Commandos 2* introduces the player to the Thief, as well as the new concept of climbing poles and swinging along wires.

routines and surprising knock-on effects. "One of the main pillars of the game was the ability to have a very, very controlled environment where *Commandos* could be seen almost like a puzzle game. [...] But at the same time, [Gonzo] wanted to have very organic reactions," he explains. "[The enemy soldiers] have a brain, they have a memory where they remember the last few things that they had seen, levels of anxiety, and things like that. That meant that the game could react in unexpected ways." Jon adds that the plans for enemy AI were even more complex at the start of development: "In the end we simplified it down, because it was complicated. But some of the complexity lived on and actually brought some of the funny behaviours of the enemies when they would do weird things." Javier says that we'd now call this kind of stuff 'emergent gameplay', but no one had heard of the term at the time.

"One of the main pillars of the game was the ability to have a very, very controlled environment where Commandos could be seen almost like a puzzle game"

JON BELTRÁN DE HEREDIA

But creating something this unique came with its fair share of problems. "It felt like everything was a very difficult challenge because we were breaking new ground in almost everything," explains Jon. "The graphics engine was difficult to put together and make it work. There was no previous reference for this kind of engine, so it was challenging."

Jon adds that the physics of *Commandos* came from a surprising source: "We had been trying to make another game, which was kind of a *Doom* clone. It didn't pan out, but then I turned this into a simulation of creatures moving around in a sector map – I call it a sector map – which was like a freeform scenario, not grid based. And that became the *Commandos* physics." This new physics engine wasn't without its issues, however. "It was very problematic when units got stuck on corners – that was a problem throughout," Jon notes.

Javier says that in terms of the user interface and control scheme, they took a lot of inspiration from real-time strategy games like *Warcraft* – but if anything, *Commandos* was far more complicated. "*Commandos* had all these abilities to split the screen and change views, so you could have multiple

MEET THE TEAM

THE KEY PLAYERS OF COMMANDOS

1 DRIVER

NICKNAME: Tread
REAL NAME: Samuel Brooklyn

This shady fellow is an ex-con from the US who escaped to the UK and assumed the identity of Sid Perkins. His primary ability is – you guessed it – driving, but he can also do first aid and has a submachine gun that's handy for getting out of tough situations. In *Commandos 2*, he can set traps and throw grenades.

2 RESISTANCE OPERATIVE

NICKNAME: The Seductress/Lips
REAL NAME: Natasha Nikochevski

Natasha appeared briefly in *Beyond The Call Of Duty* as a Dutch contact called Natasha Van De Zand, but her name was altered for *Commandos 2*, with her country of origin changed to Russia. She can distract enemy soldiers with her sultry talk, but she's also a bit nifty with a sniper rifle.

3 SNIPER

NICKNAME: Duke
REAL NAME: Sir Francis T Woolridge

The Sniper is incredibly useful thanks to his ability to pick off enemies undetected from a great distance away. But clearly he's very forgetful, because he only seems to remember to bring a handful of bullets with him on every mission. Duke also doubles up as a medic on some missions.

4 SAPPER

NICKNAME: Inferno
REAL NAME: Thomas Hancock

The team's demolition expert can plant timed explosives and remote-controlled bombs, as well as throw grenades, cut through wire fences and plant lethal man-traps. In *Commandos 2* he can also use a mine detector and deactivate enemy mines, picking them up to use later on.

5 THIEF

NICKNAME: Lupin
REAL NAME: Paul Toledo

Introduced in *Commandos 2*, the Thief is tiny and very nimble, so he can squeeze through small gaps as well as climb poles and shimmy along wires. He can also tail enemies and pick their pockets, open safes and trunks using his lockpicks, and, in *Commandos 3*, garotte enemies using piano wire.

6 MARINE (DIVER)

NICKNAME: Fins
REAL NAME: James Blackwood

Fins has an inflatable boat that he can deploy to ferry the other commandos across water, and he can also dive underwater, becoming invisible to the enemy. His harpoon and knife are handy for dispatching enemies silently, and in *Commandos 2* he can use a grappling hook to climb buildings.

7 SPY

NICKNAME: Spooky
REAL NAME: Rene Duchamp

The Spy can steal enemy uniforms and wander into enemy encampments undetected, using a poisoned syringe to dispatch Nazis silently. He can also distract enemies by talking to them, but high-ranking officers will see through his disguise. Rene goes by the nickname 'Frenchy' in some versions.

8 DOG

NICKNAME: Whiskey
REAL NAME: Er... Whiskey

The team finds this dog next to a wounded ally in *Commandos 2*, and quickly adopts him as part of the team. Whiskey the bull terrier can sniff out mines, but his primary ability is to bark at enemies to distract them while the other commandos sneak past. And enemies won't attack him because... well, because he's a dog. What a Good Boy.

9 GREEN BERET

NICKNAME: Tiny
REAL NAME: Jerry McHale

Also known as Jack 'Butcher' O'Hara in some versions, the Green Beret is a big beefy boy with the ability to knock out and tie up enemies in moments. He can also bury himself completely in snow, making him undetectable, and his radio decoy can be turned on remotely to distract enemies.

points of attention as a player. It had a lot of keyboard shortcuts. Probably the lesson from *Commandos* was there is a lot of potential to have a very, very big ability to control with a lot of precision, but a lot of people are just not going to use that. A lot of this complexity is not really necessary."

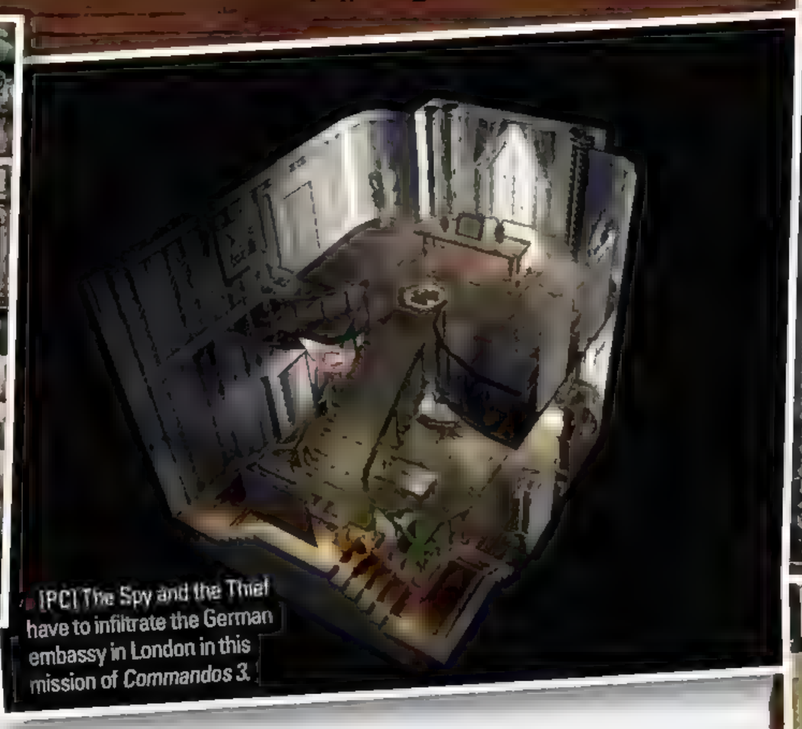
Yet despite its weirdness and complexity, *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines* was an unexpected hit on its PC release in 1998. "The sales exceeded not just our most optimistic expectations, but even our hopes. It sold like crazy!" enthuses Javier. Jon was just as surprised: "It was like one of these sleeper hits. I think it got to number one in the UK on the second week it was out, and then it remained there. That was big, and it was very unexpected." The game was a particularly huge hit in Germany, and by the end of 1998, *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines* had sold over 700,000 copies, smashing all sales expectations.

Pyro quickly signed a deal with Eidos to produce more of the same: what became 1999's *Commandos: Beyond The Call Of Duty*. "It was labelled like a mission pack," says Javier, "but it wasn't really a mission pack because it was a standalone product." But Jon reckons that not everyone was happy about the decision: "I think that the team didn't want to do it. The team wanted to go straight to *Commandos 2*. But the company wanted to do it [...]. I'm sure it made sense financially, but in other regards, not so much."

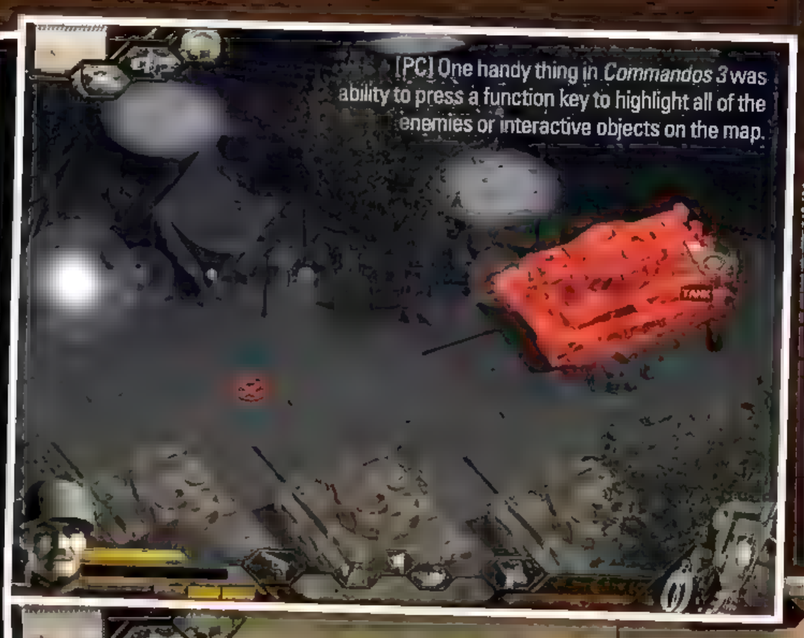
Even so, the team decided to make the best of it, and the project ended up becoming much more ambitious than expected. "I specifically remember the creative director saying, 'Look, this is the biggest map we're ever going to have,' and that turned out to be the smallest map of the whole mission pack!" remembers Javier. "Everything was like, 'Let's do as much as we can.' The difficulty was also a result of that: everyone, all the designers and playtesters, were already so familiar with all the things that you can

[PC] Whiskey the dog is introduced late into *Commandos 2*, and what a wonderful addition to the roster he makes.

» [PC] One of the later levels of *Commandos 2* features this huge ship carrying Japanese planes.



[PC] The Spy and the Thief have to infiltrate the German embassy in London in this mission of *Commandos 3*.



[PC] One handy thing in *Commandos 3* was ability to press a function key to highlight all of the enemies or interactive objects on the map.

» [PC] In *Commandos 3*, a window will pop up if one of your soldiers gets attacked to alert you to what's happening.

» [PC] In *Strike Force*, the Spy can garrotte enemies and steal their uniforms to infiltrate enemy areas.

» [PC] At times, *Strike Force* goes into all-out enemy-gunning action, particularly when the Green Beret is involved.

do that a hard level would feel to them like easy." Indeed, *Beyond The Call Of Duty* was notorious for its difficulty, but also for its wonderful level design, like a mission set in a bombed-out zoo with roving lions, and a raid to destroy experimental German jet planes.

Still, a 'proper' sequel was inevitable, and the stakes were high. "Because *Commandos* had been so successful, *Commandos 2* was in the spotlight for Eidos for the whole development, and so there was a lot more pressure," says Jon. "Eidos was a publicly traded company so they had to post quarterly results. They were in some trouble because Lara Croft becoming… I mean, their games were not being so successful, and they needed to sell a lot. So suddenly *Commandos 2* became the game they hoped would save their results. So the amount of pressure was enormous. I think they were going to duplicate 1 million copies on day one."

The devs didn't make it easy for themselves, though. "We threw all the code [for *Commandos*] and restarted it from scratch," says Jon. Javier adds, "On *Commandos 2* it was like, there's a bigger budget and the publisher is super happy, so let's do something really big and ambitious. There was some boost to the engine, to the graphics, to everything, it was completely different."

"It was like, there's a bigger budget and the publisher is super happy, so let's do something really big and ambitious"
JAVIER AREVALO

And whereas around 18 people worked on the first *Commandos* game, the sequel saw the team peak at about 40, around half of whom were in the art department. The extra hands meant that the look of each level, whether it was the Eiffel Tower or Colditz Castle, could be completely unique, rather than relying on assets being reused across maps, as was done in the first game. "The goal was to apply all the experience from *Commandos* and [...] make the game more detailed and more alive," says Javier.

The biggest change was that the backgrounds were now being modelled in 3D and then rendered to produce a '2D' map. And because the player's viewpoint could now be altered to different directions, each map had to be rendered multiple times to show each angle. "It was a very, very painful process," says Javier, "and after doing that render, there was a lot of post-production. In a couple of places we had to, like, fake what you would see from one direction versus the other in order to make sure that there weren't any blind spots." Not only that, the characters were now also being animated in 3D rather than 2D.

The team was pushing boundaries in terms of the technology of the time, yet, strangely, development was partially focused on a somewhat long-in-the-tooth platform. "At the beginning of *Commandos 2* there was the intention of doing a PlayStation version of it before we really knew how humongous the game was going to end up being,", says Javier. "Of course, there's no way that *Commandos 2* would have fit into the PlayStation, but in the beginning we were trying to develop it." Work on the PlayStation project was abandoned after a few months, but Javier notes that it resulted in the creation of techniques for streaming data straight from disc, which would be used in other versions.

The idea of a PlayStation version seems all the more laughable when you consider what a headache the team had when trying to port *Commandos 2* to the more-powerful PS2. "PS2 was quite a nightmare," says Jon. "The maps didn't fit in the PS2's memory, so we had to read it from the DVD drive even when you're playing the mission. And the DVD drive was quite fast when reading, but if you skip to another part of the drive, that would take ages – scrolling could grind to a halt." Getting the game to work with a joypad rather than a mouse was also quite a challenge, and involved moving the characters directly rather than clicking on where you wanted them to go. Jon was rather pleased with the result. "It felt very different to play *Commandos* like that, you felt a lot more involved with a character when you were controlling it so directly."

***Commandos 2: Men Of Courage* was released on PC in September 2001, and followed on PS2 and Xbox a year later.** But getting the game out of the door was a struggle. "We worked weekends, we worked really long hours, it was not healthy at all," says Jon. "At some points I was like, 'This is never gonna work.' It did, but we did have to pull many, many all-nighters. It was worth it because it was a life-changing kind of project, but it was hell – like, you don't want to live like that.

"And the other thing is, the game was buggy, and we were super delayed," Jon continues. "We were delaying it – they wanted to release it as it was, and it was like, 'No, this cannot be released yet, it needs more work.' The pressure was so high."

[PC] An early level of *Commandos 3* sees the Sniper doing battle with an enemy sharpshooter, reminiscent of the 2001 film *Enemy At The Gates*

By this point, Jon had had enough: "We left the company – about 13 people left and we started our own company. It was a big hit for Pyro Studios, but it was like, that was not the place for us […]. So we left and some people remained at the company, and those took over and worked on the sequel *Commandos 3* and then *Strike Force* […]. I think *Commandos 3*, it was continuing in the spirit somehow. *Strike Force* was very, very surprising, why they would… I never, never, never got it. That wasn't a great idea."

Javier wasn't involved in later *Commandos* games, either. After *Commandos 2*, he moved across to head the development team for the RTS *Praetorians*, and recalls it was a difficult time at Pyro. "The studio was growing, every year more people, more products, more ambition," he recalls. "And that was also painful in many ways: the growing pains of a studio that is trying to deliver more than it really can do. After you have a huge success like *Commandos*, everyone was under pressure to replicate that."

Commandos 3: Destination Berlin was released to mixed reviews in late 2003. *Edge* gave it 6/10, criticising its relatively short length and lack of inspiration. The review noted the much smaller maps, the lack of new characters and the recycling of much of the equipment from the previous game. Although not a bad game by any means, *Commandos 3* was nothing like the huge step forward between *Commandos* and *Commandos 2*.

Pyro reacted by turning the series into a first-person shooter for *Commandos: Strike Force* in 2006. Only three commandos – the Spy, Green Beret and Sniper – made an appearance, but the player could swap between them to approach missions in a more strategic way than in a traditional FPS. Still, it was a far cry from the previous games. Manuel Mendiluce worked as a junior QA tester on *Strike Force*, and recalls that the decision to redesign Commandos as an FPS was questioned "on many occasions, both by the team and by critics and public", adding that he thinks Pyro should have continued to specialise in strategy games. The game received a Metacritic rating of 62 on PC and sold poorly, and Pyro would later move exclusively into producing mobile and casual games, seemingly marking the death of the *Commandos* series.

But in 2018, the soldiers received an unexpected breath of life courtesy of Kalypso Media, which bought the rights to the *Commandos* series and is currently working on a new game (see 'Back To The Battlefield on page 86'). Like in the WW2 films that inspired it, *Commandos* has pulled through the narrowest of scrapes to fight another day. ✱

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

GAMES THAT FOLLOWED IN COMMANDOS' FOOTSTEPS

DESPERADOS: WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE

Year: 2001

Desperados from German studio Spellbound Entertainment took the gameplay style of *Commandos* and transferred it to the Wild West. Spellbound produced two sequels – *Desperados 2: Cooper's Revenge* (2006) and *Helldorado* (2007) – and Mimimi Games is working on *Desperados III*, which is currently set for release this year.

ROBIN HOOD: THE LEGEND OF SHERWOOD

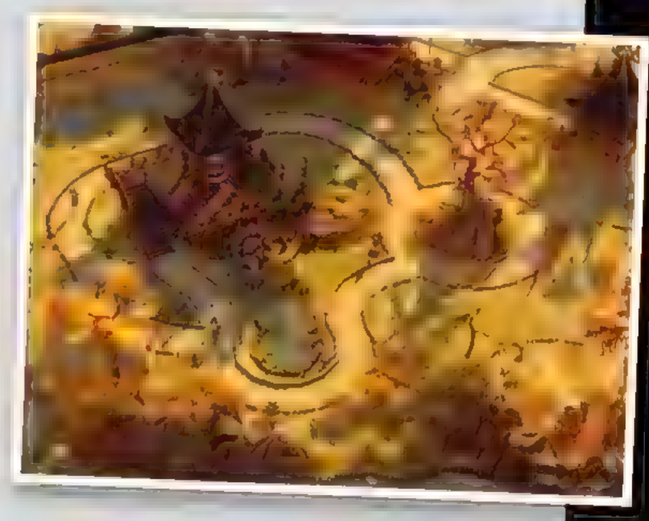
Year: 2002

Another title from Spellbound, *Robin Hood* saw players take control of the Merry Men on a quest to retrieve Robin's inheritance, which has been stolen by the Sheriff Of Nottingham. The Merry Men must sneak around and avoid killing enemies where possible, and in keeping with the theme, you're encouraged to give money to the poor, who can provide Robin with intelligence on enemies.

SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

Year: 2016

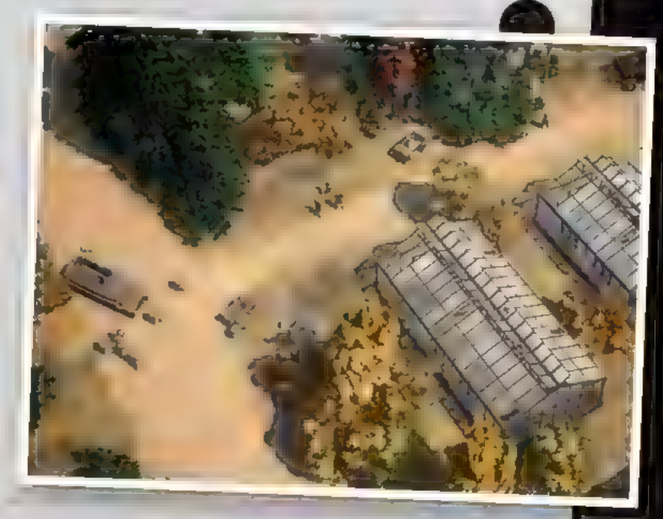
Developed by Munich-based studio Mimimi Games, *Shadow Tactics* heavily borrowed from the *Commandos* formula but shifted the setting to Edo-period Japan. *Rock Paper Shotgun* gave it a glowing review, with Tim Stone declaring: "Atmospheric and impossible to rush, *Shadow Tactics* is a fabulous game – a game I think I prefer to both *Commandos 2* and *Desperados*."



PARTISANS 1941

Year: TBC

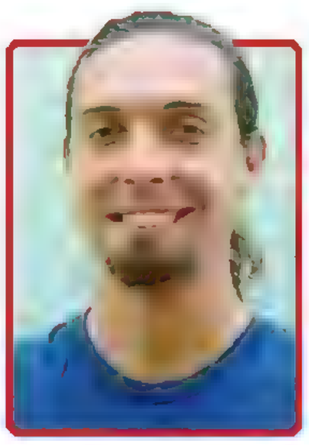
This upcoming title from Moscow-based studio Alter Games is a lovingly detailed homage to the *Commandos* games, although here the action takes place on the Eastern Front. "We like that people compare our game to *Commandos*, because *Commandos* is a legendary game series with excellent stealth gameplay," said project lead Anton Martyshenko in *PC Gamer* issue 332.



WRATH
AEON OF RUIN

Jeremiah Fox explains how KillPixel has resurrected the old-school first-person shooter, with a little help from one of the genre's big daddies...

Words by Anna Blackwell



» Jeremiah Fox is the mind behind KillPixel, and is a big fan of old-school first-person shooters

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** 3D REALMS
- **DEVELOPER:** KILLPIXEL, 3D REALMS
- **RELEASED:** 2019 (EARLY ACCESS)
- **PLATFORM:** PC, MAC, PS4, XBOX ONE, SWITCH
- **GENRE:** FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

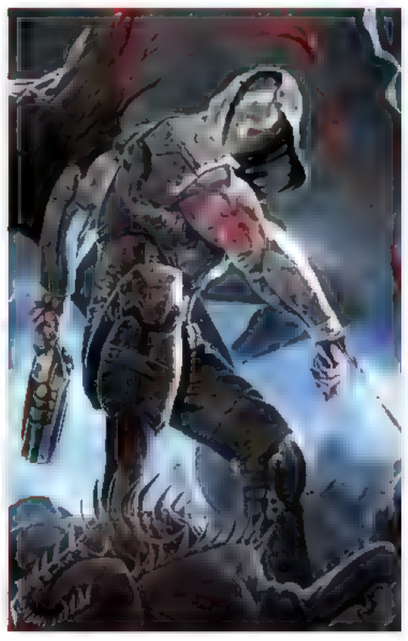
When paying homage to the old gods of gaming, you have two options. Either you go the easy road of making your game look like a relic from a bygone age by cutting your colour palette and lowering your pixel count. Or, you take the more devout path and go haul out the old machines, find the install CDs for the old development tools, and suffer every step to release something pure. Or, as developer KillPixel Games has found, you can take a third way: actually summon an old god for help (surprisingly they haven't all been murdered yet).

With the help of 3D Realms (of *Duke Nukem* fame) KillPixel has been working on *Wrath: Aeon Of Ruin*, a true-to-form classic first-person shooter built in the original *Quake* engine, and it looks pretty amazing. It's worth noting that *Wrath* is still currently in Early Access, but a fair amount of changes have happened to the game since it debuted on Steam. Taking inspiration from *Quake*, *Doom*, *Hexen* and *Blood*, *Wrath* features a dark nightmare world full of terrifying creatures, cool weapons, and many, many secrets. The game has been a real labour of love for KillPixel founder and lead developer Jeremiah Fox.

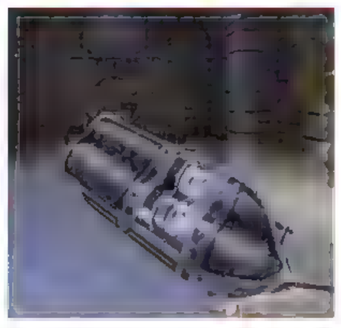
One of the things that KillPixel and 3D Realms have been keen on with *Wrath* is ensuring that their new first-person shooter would have a rich story. However, the team doesn't believe in spoon-feeding narrative, and therefore allows the player to discover the story more subtly in a manner that's more akin to *Dark Souls*' clever environmental storytelling. So as you explore the various crypts, temples, forests and blood-soaked nightmare rooms, make sure to pay attention to your surroundings for details on what went down there, as they could prove crucial clues for later on in the game. Plus, you can uncover various secrets, artefacts and keys needed to progress. Basically, keep your eyes as ready as your weapons.

The focus on immersion permeates every layer of *Wrath*. The use of fangs and cysts as ammo, instead of a typical gun magazine and shells grounds you in this dark fantasy world where you have to fight to survive. But what strikes out most is *Wrath*'s interesting save system. "In my opinion, saving is a *mechanic*; it's something you do that has a profound effect on the game experience," explains Jeremiah. KillPixel has challenged the accepted save button and instead opted for checkpoint shrines and the very novel Soul Tether:

» [PC] *Wrath*'s hero has just encountered the **Retro Gamer** team the morning after deadline



WEAPONS OF WAR
Tools for managing your anger



COACH GUN
A handheld, triple-barrelled gun that fires massive slugs with an alternate mode that fires all three simultaneously.

FANG SPITTER
A fully automatic weapon that spits out the fangs collected from fallen enemies, making ammo a plentiful resource.

RETCHER
A fusion of steel mechanisms and undead flesh that launches the noxious cysts harvested from the fallen hordes.

RUINATION BLADE
An arm-mounted blade forged from a mysterious metal. In addition to hacking and slashing enemies, it allows the wearer to lunge great distances.

SHOTGUN
Turn enemies to a red mist at close range or use the secondary fire to launch hunks of molten steel that explode into devastating ricocheting shrapnel up impact.

» [PC] You can clearly see the DNA of *Quake* in the environment and creature design

an item that players can place as their respawn point. You might be a little sceptical of this, but Jeremiah makes a great case for including them in Wrath. "Saving is essentially a sort of retroactive god mode and foreknowledge," he elaborates. "Not only does it have such an influence on the game itself, but you interact with this mechanic in a way very different to others. With traditional saving, you use a save menu which pulls your mind out of the game world and into an interface for a piece of software which you can then manipulate." So having an in-world item that both thematically and mechanically serves this function heightens that immersion. It's a neat idea and once again highlights that KillPixel is trying to do something a little different with the genre.

Developing a Nineties-style FPS is about more than just looking the part, though. There are nuances to the genre that stem from concessions to the hardware limitations. All of which can be mimicked by modern tools. By using the *Quake* engine and QuakeC (a C-based language exclusive to *Quake*), the team is able to make something that doesn't just feel authentic but is genuine. The only differences are that with modern hardware advances, KillPixel and 3D Realms were able to leverage more power out of the engine.

But if that isn't authentic enough for you, *Quake* scene veterans and composers make up part of the dev team, crafting the world of *Wrath* into a work of art. It doesn't get any more authentic than that. Development is still continuing with *Wrath: Aeon Of Ruin* and one of the areas where both KillPixel and 3D Realms are paying a lot of attention to is the game's proposed multiplayer mode. It's an area of the game that is important to Jeremiah (and part and parcel of most retro FPS games).

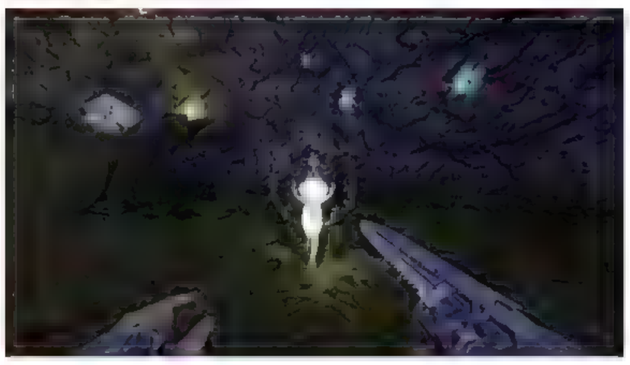
One thing that is clear is that KillPixel is intent on ensuring that those in early access are getting their money's worth and as a result tweaks are constantly being made to the game, with the latest including a brand-new difficulty mode called Outlander, increasing the FOV limit to 120, numerous bug fixes and other improvements to make the game as enjoyable as possible. But launch isn't the end of the road for *Wrath*, and Jeremiah hints at the desire to do "one or two proper, high-quality expansions".

Most excitingly though, *Wrath* will have mod support from launch on both Steam Workshop and, once it's set up, a bespoke service. "[It's] a central place that users can upload and download content that can then be accessed through the in-game mod menu. Modding and user content is a major focus and we want to make it as easy as possible for people to make, share and enjoy it," Jeremiah affirms. Custom campaigns, extra weapons, with the *Quake*/*Doom* modding communities' extensive history, the possibilities are endless! ✱

» [PC] The wrist-mounted blade lets you get up close and personal with your gory kills.

» [PC] *Wrath* was slated for a summer 2019 release, however it's been pushed back – presumably to marinade the game in blood

» [PC] Venture off the beaten path and you'll find some hidden surprises, like this power-up.



ROAD TO RUIN

What to expect from Wrath

PLUNDER THE DEPTHS

■ Items can be found in the various coffers around Old World. Bust 'em open and leave no grave unturned. You'll find that *Wrath* has many secrets to find and collect, so make sure to check every nook and cranny, especially if you want to save your game as Soul Tethers are hidden and finite!

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

■ Each of the nine weapons in *Wrath* has an alternate fire mode which opens up the gory possibilities even more. Combine that with powers like life-stealing artefacts, shrine-given flight, or temporary invincibility and you have a whole lot of options for carnage.

KNIFE FIGHT

■ Inspired by and built in the same engine as the game that defined what FPS meant for a whole generation, you bet it will have multiplayer. Grab your Fangspitter and Retcher and gib your friends! *Wrath* is coming to all major consoles, PC, Mac and Linux so whatever your weapon of choice, you'll be able to duke it out via LAN or online.

FIRST JOB
Yard work

CURRENT JOB
President of Ratslym

FAVOURITE FILM
The Mask Of Dimitrios

FAVOURITE ALBUM
The Doors

FAVOURITE BOOK
The Flashman Papers

FIRST COMPUTER/CONSOLE
NES

FAVOURITE COMPUTER CONSOLE
PC

BEST GAMING ACHIEVEMENT
Being part of the *Q*bert* team

BESTSELLING PRODUCT
*Q*bert*

BEST HOLIDAY
A recent trip to England, Scotland and Belgium

WHO YOU WANT TO BE STRANDED WITH
My lovely wife, of course

"Most of the programmers hadn't done games before and it was reasonable that some efforts would come to naught"
Jeff Lee

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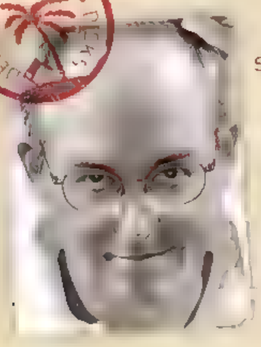


SEX M
NAME Jeff Lee
YEAR OF BIRTH 1952
PLACE OF BIRTH Elkhart, Indiana

BIOGRAPHY

Jeff was the first artist employed at Gottlieb when the company moved into the videogames business and worked on many Eighties coin-ops including *Q*bert*.

Jeff Lee

What cherished games would you take to the island?

Jeff Lee worked as an artist at Gottlieb just as the old pinball company was getting into the exciting new world of videogames. He tells us all about lasers, stooges and big noses

Words by Paul Drury

As he's often been dubbed 'The Father Of Q*bert', we wondered if Jeff Lee, the artist who first drew the big-nosed, wide-eyed bouncer, ever feels protective of the little guy?

"I don't like it when they give him arms," he replies, "like they did in the animated TV series. It's against canon! Yeah, I do feel protective towards him but unfortunately, much like with my own children, he's outside my sphere of influence."

It's a sensible attitude given that Q*bert is one of those iconic videogame characters of the Eighties that has never really left popular culture, still appearing not only in games but on T-shirts, as a cuddly toy and on the big screen in such movies as *Pixels* and *Wreck-It Ralph*.

The game's legacy is a source of pride for Jeff, whose upbringing in the western suburbs of Chicago meant he was aware of the pioneering pinball company Gottlieb, a stalwart of the city since the 1920s. He was heading up the graphics department of a local community college when in 1982, he received a call from Richard Tracy, an old friend who worked at Gottlieb, saying they needed an artist to join their new videogames division.

"It was a job working with my friend making games," smiles Jeff. "What could be sweeter than that? I was roughly the same age as the engineers and programmers, though I felt quite ignorant in terms of technical knowledge. But that didn't matter because I was the artist. They pretty much deferred to me when it came to the graphics. People who aren't artists and say they can't draw just think whatever we produce is awesome!"

Jeff's first project brought together the old and new Gottlieb in a very real sense. *Caveman* was a pinball-videogame hybrid, in the mould of *Baby Pac-Man*, which had you flipping silver balls on a traditional pinball table before triggering a maze-based videogame interlude on the screen above. "It was a good introduction for me," he explains. "I had a very limited palette of four colours... and one was black! I had limited sprites and limited animation possibilities. Working with such limited resources really trains you to be economical and that was good preparation for what was to come."

The new games department was very much still in the development stage both in terms of technology and working out what kind of games to produce. Jeff had begun by using an Apple II to create his art before moving up to the brilliantly titled FOGUS and BOGUS custom boards created in-house, which considerably increased the available colours and sprites, yet the projects he was assigned to felt less well developed. There was *Quizimodo*, a monochrome quiz game that failed to set the market alight and *Argus*, a *Superman*-themed game without the licence, which went through many iterations before being shelved. "Most of the programmers hadn't done games before and it was reasonable that some efforts would come to naught," says Jeff. "We all felt we were just starting out here. There was always other proposals for games in the works and you always had hopes."

Thankfully, those hopes were about to be realised and Jeff would be key to Gottlieb's first major videogame hit. He'd been a fan of MC Escher and his perspective-mangling artwork for many years and still has pencil sketches he made of isometric cubes from his college days. Jeff submitted a game proposal with a pyramid of cubes, populated by various nasties and one long-nosed, armless creature. "He was more rubbery than furry at this point," he recalls, "and his nose is a gun because the idea was called '*Snots And Boogers*' and he'd shoot from this nose. In fact, his whole body and head is like the turret of a tank. Originally I proposed this 'noser' character could shift on to a different plane which didn't happen but Warren [Davis – the programmer] kept the basic idea of hopping around that pyramid." ▶

Trivia

When *Q*bert* appeared on the cover of *Video Games* magazine in April 1983, Jeff was interviewed about his role in creating the game, but under the pseudonym 'R Teeste'. Do you see what they did there?

The Gottlieb boys back together for one last time (left to right) Jeff, Ron Waxman, Kan Yabumoto and Howie Rubin. Sadly Ron and Kan have now passed away.

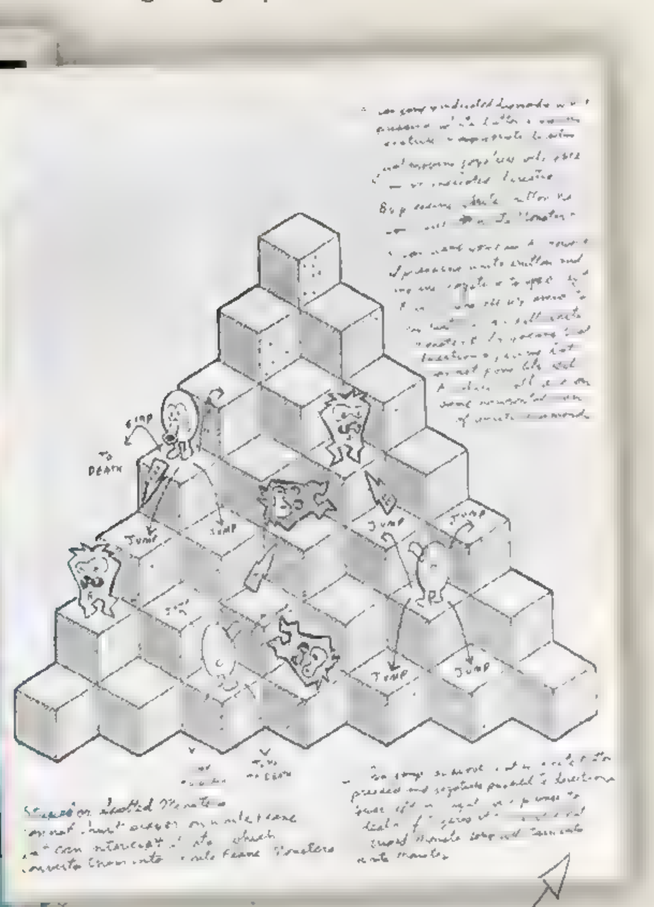
Praise for Jeff

Here's what **Retro Gamer** has to say about Jeff Lee's work...

Darran Jones
*Q*bert* is one of those classic arcade games which is instantly easy to grasp, but incredibly difficult to master. I've a lot of fond memories of playing Jeff's game at Poole Quay Amusements and it's been really interesting to learn about the many games he's worked on that didn't gain that same success.

Paul Drury
I met and interviewed Jeff at the Free Play Florida pinball and videogame show last year and what a pleasure it was. He is warm, witty and incredibly knowledgeable about Gottlieb/Mylstar's venture into videogames – plus I got to play *Mad Planets* on an original cab, which is always wonderful.

You can admire Jeff's cartoonist skills at jeffreylee.com.



Jeff's original proposal for the game that would become Q*bert.

The project was a real team effort, with Warren leading the coding and game design, Jeff handling the art and creating the cast of characters and Dave Thiel providing some memorable sound effects, including the gobbledegook profanity Q*bert utters when he dies. Even Gottlieb vice president Ron Waxman made a valuable contribution, suggesting the cubes change colour when hopped on. The unusual game concept proved a huge hit, its mix of puzzling and twitch gaming paired with a likeable and unarmed lead character, in both senses. "I don't regret Q*bert couldn't shoot from his nose," says Jeff.. "That's a good thing. And it meant you could play one-handed! In the other hand you could be holding a drink, a cigarette, your girlfriend or whatever. It's gaming stripped down to its simplest element, like *Pac-Man*. It's almost zen-like."

Jeff also worked on the unreleased update, *Faster Harder More Challenging Q*bert*, which did exactly what it said on the marquee, offering a sterner test to players and adding the evil Q*bertha. An official sequel, *Q*bert's Qubes*, did arrive in arcades at the end of 1983 and took the game concept deeper into abstract territory – possibly too far for most players. "I don't think it was too complicated," argues Jeff. "It's a matter of spatial recognition and working out how to get these cubes turned in time with all these hazards. That game was designed by Neil Bernstein and I created a new cast of characters. It's fun and challenging and I keep going back to it because I really don't think I should be getting wiped out as soon as I do..."

> "I just thought, 'If the engineers are doing this, it's gonna work. Why wouldn't it?'"
> Jeff Lee

It's a game which, due to its limited production run, you may have missed first time round and the same could be said of *Mad Planets*, an excellent but often overlooked shoot-'em-up. A labour of love for designer Kan Yabumoto, who sadly passed away in 2017, Jeff's original sketches for the game actually gave the planets faces, a la Georges Méliès' 1902 film *A Trip To the Moon*, which scowled as they got angrier. "That game grew organically," explains Jeff. "Kan started it as an experiment in background animation, getting the star pattern animation, and he wanted to show off the new board which could move 256 sprites on screen at once. I know people said how cool it was that the moons orbiting the planets cast shadows on the surface. I'm really pleased people at the time appreciated how much we did on that game."

The attention to detail is impressive, as is the frenetic blasting, though the game's unusual control setup, which pairs a flight stick and trigger button with a spinner, means the experience doesn't translate well via emulation. Easier to appreciate is *Krull*, a five-screen arcade adventure with shades of *Robotron* and *Gauntlet*, which is more fun than the film – though that could be viewed as damning with faint praise.

"With *Krull*, the idea was to have the film and game come out simultaneously," says Jeff. "I think we had some stills to work from but no film footage. Anyway, we didn't have any VCRs in the office! There was quite a big cast in that game – the Slayers, Prince Colwyn and his men, the Beast and all those boulders. It was cheesy, cheap animation with about two frames. I sometimes took Polaroids of real life to help but I also used the pioneering studies by Edmund Muybridge of human movement."

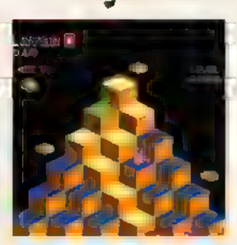
If you've played the game, you may conclude Jeff gave his characters five espressos before sending them on their quest, such is the rapidity of their leg movement, though we do like the way the Beast skulks off to his cave once defeated like a stroppy teenager.

Jeff's next project would also have a film link but this time, the game would boast its own movie. *Us Vs Them* utilised the exciting new LaserDisc format to overlay computer graphics on actual film footage, telling the story of a bunch of brave pilots and a maverick captain fighting off an alien invasion in unashamedly B-movie fashion. "I made the player's ship out of a tube with cardboard wings and some other plastic parts, spray painted it silver and gave it a cockpit," he explains, surely deserving a *Blue Peter* badge for his craftsmanship. "I even added the Mylstar logo on to the wings. I took Polaroids of the

Timeline

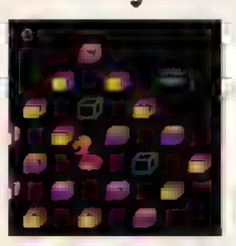
1982

Q*BERT
■ **YEAR:** 1982
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
A true classic from the golden age of arcades, this is still played competitively, and in 2020 we may see the first 100-hour game on a single credit. Stay tuned.



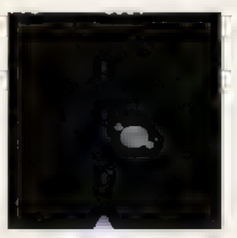
1983

Q*BERT'S QUBES
■ **YEAR:** 1983
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Given the popularity of its predecessor, it's surprising this innovative follow-up isn't better known. We urge you to sample its esoteric charms.



1983

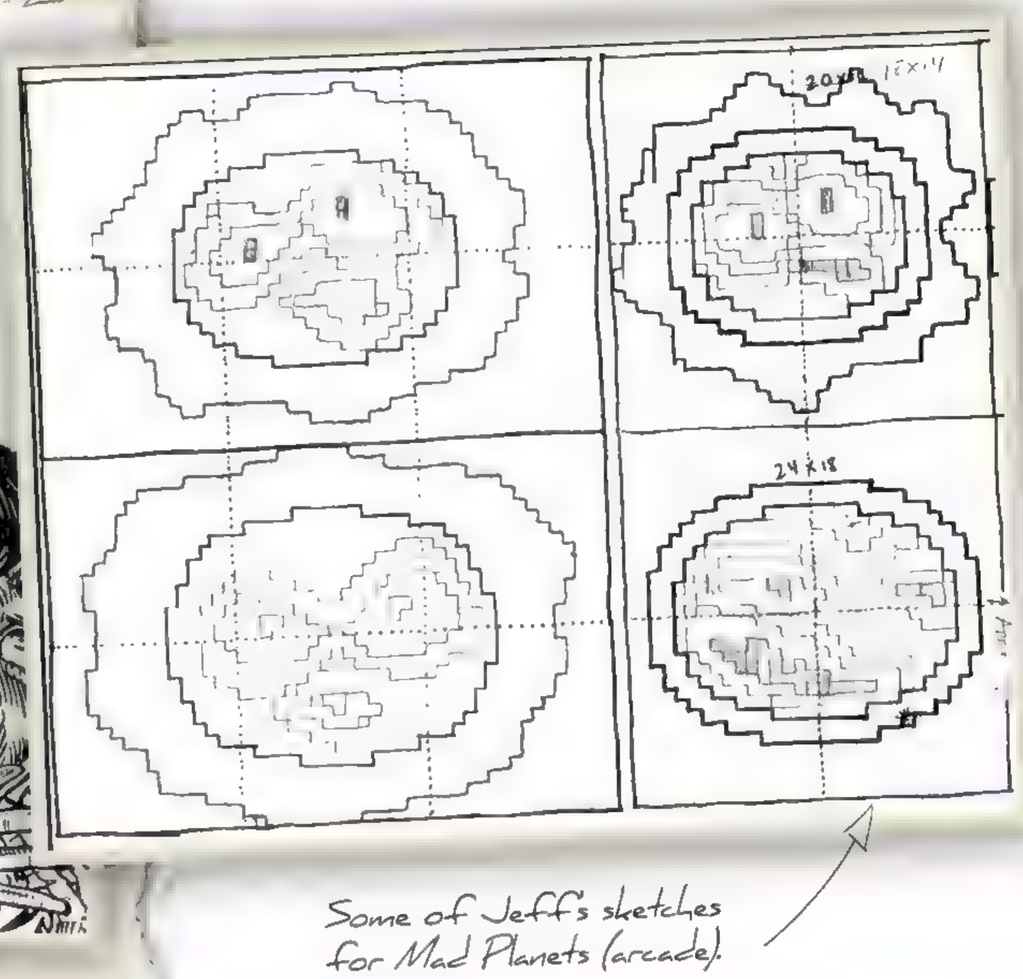
MAD PLANETS
■ **YEAR:** 1983
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
An excellent and often-overlooked blaster, with some lovely graphical touches from Jeff. Best played on an original cabinet due to its unusual control setup.



1983

KRULL
■ **YEAR:** 1983
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
The film flopped which rather undermined this coin-op tie-in which is a pity, as there's quite a lot of fun to be found in its five varied levels.

Jeff's sketch for the Us Vs Them arcade flyer – that's him on the left in the glasses and hat.



Some of Jeff's sketches for Mad Planets (arcade).

Q*Bert & He

"I had this big archive of stuff from my videogame days and I'd kept in touch with lots of people," smiles Jeff when we ask him about the motivation behind writing his memoir. "I was invited to a party a few years ago for the 35th birthday of *Q*bert* at this guy 'Trickman' Terry Minnich's house and that was my introduction to this whole retro gaming scene which I had no idea about. That was the start of it all!" The result was the fascinating *Q*Bert & We*, the story of Jeff's time making games, which features extensive interviews with colleagues and much exclusive artwork, and is available at jeffreyplee.com.

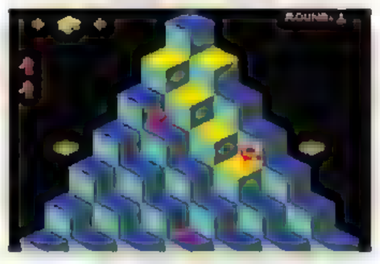
various rotations, traced them on to tracing paper, put them on the light table and with grid paper, I turned them into sprites. That was the process back then!"

Released in 1984, *Us Vs Them* proved to be one of the best LaserDisc titles, with real variety and imagination in the gameplay and by casting professional actors in key roles, it made full use of the new technology. Yet there lay the problem – and why the game only had a limited release. LaserDisc cabinets which worked perfectly in the development lab could not cope with the harsh environment of the arcade and frequent disc errors led to operators losing faith with the whole medium. "It never crossed my mind there would be problems," sighs Jeff. "Lots of companies were making LaserDisc games. I just thought, 'If the engineers are doing this, it's gonna work. Why wouldn't it?' But then I knew the industry as a whole was in trouble. There had been a huge oversaturation of products. A bubble, I suppose. Ultimately, there were only so many arcades and only so many customers for arcade games. As home based games start rising, it was eating into the market, too..."

Gottlieb, renamed Mylstar in late 1983 by Coca-Cola after the soft beverage giant acquired its parent company Columbia Pictures, was facing major challenges as the videogames business went through a serious shakedown. Staff were laid off and many games Jeff worked on were cancelled, including *Curveball*, *Video Vince* and not one but two versions of *Wiz Warz*. "It was a regular occurrence and we looked at it like the movie and TV business. Not every movie made gets released and not every TV pilot becomes a series. I do wish *Tylz* had been completed though. It was conceived and programmed by Chris Krubel, the coprogrammer on *Krull*. He was weird, hilarious, super intelligent [...] and funny as hell. I did the art and really got into it, designing this set of demented chessmen which fitted in with his personality. Who knows if it would've been a great game but I had a good feeling about it." ▶

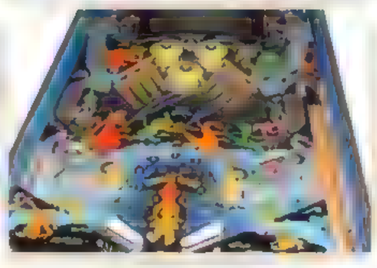
Jeff on Jeff

Jeff picks his three favourite projects



Q*BERT

"It evolved from an old graphic obsession of mine, a hardware exercise by Kan Yabumoto, a coding experiment by Warren Davis and 'sound-bytes' from David Thiel."



CAVEMAN

"This is the project I cut my baby teeth on – a videogame but primarily a pinball table. Didn't do well but a fond memory nonetheless."

DOUBLE CHEESE

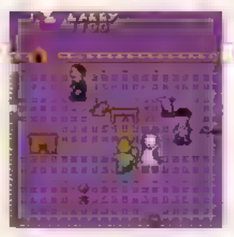
"Lots of sprites and 256 colours to spend on animation of lab rats in their knickers bouncing balls of cheese with their arses. I get paid to do this?"

1984

US VS THEM
■ **YEAR:** 1984
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
One of the best LaserDisc games, sadly released just as the format fell out of favour. For a full Making Of article, see **RG195**.

1984

THE THREE STOOGES
■ **YEAR:** 1984
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Jeff's last game for Mylstar featured the classic comedy trio and really showed off his pixel art and cartoon sensibilities.

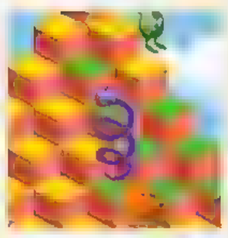


1989

EXTERMINATOR
■ **YEAR:** 1989
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
A wonderfully weird title which has the distinction of being the first game to use digitised graphics throughout.

1992

Q*BERT 3
■ **YEAR:** 1992
■ **FORMAT:** SNES
Jeff returned to his first gaming hit and created new enemies for Q*bert to dodge – as well as ensuring our hero remained armless.



As the arcade scene began to wind down, Jeff found himself working on console games like Home Alone.

Readers' Questions

Merman: What sort of hardware/development system were you drawing with at Gottlieb?
The Apple II initially and then there was a proprietary board and software, developed by Jun Yum and Jim Weisz respectively, based on the Intel 8080 chip, I believe.

Mr Jenzie: As it's one of my favourite films, how many times did you watch *Krull* for reference when you were working on the game?
I did go and see it once and recall not being that entertained. I'm not sure if I went with the development team or my girlfriend but I do remember not being impressed… but you know, that movie has some hardcore fans who delight in cheesy or bad movies. Or maybe they think it's great!

Merman: Did you use a lot of reference material when you produced the graphics for *Mad Planets*?
Back when I was working at the junior college, they had an actual observatory and put on these slideshows and laser shows. We had a lot of stock photos coming from the deep space missions to Jupiter and Saturn in the late Seventies and early Eighties that were sending back images that we'd never seen before. I still have some of them […] and I know I used them as reference material.

Northway: Did anyone object to Q*bert swearing?
That did happen! I got an email in the Nineties from a kid who told me when he was growing up in Arkansas, the game was taken out of the arcade because people complained Q*bert was swearing. It was an issue in certain sectors of this country!

Mr Jenzie: In *Exterminator*, whose hands did you digitise for the game?
They aren't mine! They belong to Warren Davis, the programmer and game designer.

> "The market was against us. Exterminator was maybe too weird and the controls were too difficult for players"
> Jeff Lee

If you're interested, a prototype of *Tylz* is available on the internet, so you can make up your own mind. One game that did get a full release, however, was *The Three Stooges*, the subtitle of *Brides* is hinting at its fiancé-rescuing theme. Jeff had grown up watching the popular slapstick shenanigans of Larry, Curly and Moe and as he knew Columbia Pictures had made those seminal short films, he pitched a game based on their pie-throwing antics. "Sam Russo took it up as the programmer and I was really enthusiastic about doing the art," grins Jeff. "Sam recalls throwing some sort of goo against walls and recording the sound for the pies splatting in the game. Stuff was being hurled and things were being hit. Our boss Ron Waxman raised some concerns…"

Sadly, it was more than goo that was about to hit the fan. Mylstar closed its doors in September 1984 and Jeff returned to freelancing as an artist, doing illustrations for various newspapers and graphics work for Macromind, which included producing art for popular Mac game *Maze Wars+*, released in 1986. He kept his hand in the arcade business, producing the visuals for Incredible Technologies' overhead driving game *Banzi Run* which was complete but never fully released, then near the end of the decade, he once again teamed up with Warren Davis at Premier Electronics for the innovative *Exterminator*. The game features a giant disembodied hand which can crush, grab or shoot a host of insects and other pests which have invaded your home. It's an unusual concept with a distinctive look created solely from digitised graphics, all housed in a striking custom cabinet.

"That was a great project to work on," beams Jeff. "By this time, I was married with small children and consumer camcorders were relatively cheap. I could use the same one I was using to film my kids to capture images, as well as the sophisticated cameras we had at the office. We digitised all kinds of stuff for that game… roly poly bugs I filmed in a wash pan in my backyard, frogs jumping and I made models of stuff, like the wasps and the interior of the house, and filmed them. But the market was against us. It was maybe too weird and the controls were too difficult for players. It got some great reviews from some British publications – they said it would either make us a lot of money or we'd go broke!"

Jeff starts to laugh, confirming it was indeed the latter, though not before the company returned to creating pinball machines for several years, given their renaissance in the early Nineties. The new decade saw Jeff move into console games, working on *Home Alone* for the Mega Drive released in 1992 and then for the SNES, he brought his artistic talents to *Q*bert 3*, an interesting and slightly psychedelic take on the cube-hopping formula. "That was a rare incidence of someone tracking me down. I got a call from the guys who had the licence who knew I was the original artist. It was great going back to those characters, with better resolution and more colours. And of course, I made sure he had no arms."

Though Jeff no longer works in the industry, his interest in videogames and the history of the medium remains undiminished. In 2018 he published *Q*bert & We*, chronicling his time at Gottlieb and featuring interviews with many of his old colleagues (see the 'Q*Bert & He' box on the previous page), and he is a regular guest at retro shows across the USA. He also lives close to the wonderful Galloping Ghost arcade in Chicago which houses many of his classic coin-op titles, including *Q*bert* of course. We wonder if, when he sees his long-nosed creation in the arcade or on the movie screen, does he smile and think, 'My boy did good…'?

"Something akin to that," Jeff says, chuckling. "To some people, *Q*Bert* means nothing, but for those that it does, I still get a, 'Wow, did you do that?'"

Trivia

Jeff worked alongside Tim Skelly at Gottlieb, who he describes as, "Very cool, hyper-intelligent, witty and kind of cutting at times. And he didn't require any artistic help from me!"

Many thanks to Jeff, his goddaughter Nora Canfield, 'Trickman' Terry Minnich and arcade-museum.com for providing photos and sketches. ✱

Jeff's Desert Island Disks

The games that Jeff simply couldn't live without

01 Q*bert's Qubes (ARCADE)
I can't improve my pitiful *Q*bert* high score, but I think I could make some headway on this sequel. How hard can it be?

02 Dig Dug (ARCADE)
This is a darned cute game, with a catchy, busy theme song [It's no *Mr Do!* - Ed] and I'm sure I could make much more progress on it. I'm curious to see what lies ahead.

03 Sid Meier's Civilization (PC)
I've never played it, but some friends love it. With lots of time on a desert island and only seven games for distraction, I could dive deep into this grand saga. Strictly speaking, not a 'favourite' game but it would be if I invested the time.

04 Dungeons & Dragons Online (PC)
The desert island has internet, right? I've spent innumerable hours playing this time-waster with no end in sight. I'll probably play it after finishing this survey.

05 Qix (ARCADE)
We had this game in the Gottlieb break room for a while and I just loved it. The pure abstraction and simple premise give it a sublime elegance.

06 Centipede (ARCADE)
This is a pulse-pounding exercise with lovely graphics and awesome audio. The shooting sounds and plummeting insect bombs are richly satisfying. I think it is one of the greatest trackball games ever made.

07 Haunted House (PINBALL)
I supposed I should take along a pin-table for variety's sake. Again, a sentimental favourite designed by colleagues of mine. Plus it has multiple flippers and three levels of play, so a lot of challenges present themselves.

08 Euchre 3D (IOS)
I love card games and have this app on my iPhone. Why I waste so much time playing this card game I cannot say… I suppose I enjoy the company of the players. However, I am on a desert island so cannot scrounge up a party of four, hence I'm using the app. Unfortunately, my partner bot is an idiot, it seems, so I have to work extra hard.

Nintendogs

MAKING DEADLINES A LITTLE LESS STRESSFUL

RETROREVIVAL

» NINTENDO DS » 2005 » NINTENDO EAD

I don't care for dogs. I was bitten by a black Labrador when I was nine and I've never warmed to them as a result. I don't actively hate them, but I still remain wary of most canines, and it takes me a very long time to accept the dogs of friends and family (if I accept them at all). They might be man's best friend, but they're certainly not mine, so it may come of something of a surprise to discover that I have a heavily played copy of *Nintendogs* (ironically the Labrador edition) in my collection.

The DS appealed to me from the get-go, and I've already mentioned how I ordered a US system as soon as it was released. I've always enjoyed handhelds and I love how tactile the DS is – everything from its stylus, to its second screen and microphone fascinated me, and I quickly began to amass a collection of games for it. *Nintendogs* instantly grabbed my attention when it was first announced because it sounded like a supercharged Tamagotchi, something both my wife and myself had enjoyed, and it also utilised all of the console's unique features.

As a DS owner, I'd often hear phrases like, "Well it's okay, but it's not really a proper game, is it?" whenever I was playing games like *Brain Training* and *Nintendogs* at work and I quickly began to ignore those who made such silly proclamations. Hindsight shows us that many DS games laid the bite-sized groundwork that's now commonplace in many of the popular mobile games of today, but even 15 years ago that approach didn't seem acceptable because a ten-minute play-about with *Nintendogs* didn't seemingly represent good value for money.

It was certainly easy to get bored with *Nintendogs* as it doesn't really offer much to do beyond grooming and feeding your pet, or taking it out for walks and teaching it to play flying disc, but I constantly found myself checking up on my adorable little pupster throughout the day and it proved a great way of destressing while writing the Retro section of *games™*. No wonder I racked up so many hours up on it. ✱

home

RETRORATED

>> This month we look at a compilation of Psikyo shooters, play though M2's excellent new ports of Shinobi and Fantasy Zone, and find out how Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath fares on Switch

» [Switch] *Sol Divide* has some great bombs, including this excellent one which freezes everything for a limited period.

Psikyo Shooting Stars Alpha

SHOOTING STAR OR FALLING STAR?

INFORMATION

» **RELEASED:** OUT NOW

» **PRICE:** £34.99 (£54.99 PHYSICAL)

» **PUBLISHER:** NIS AMERICA

» **DEVELOPER:** ZERODIV

» **PLAYERS:** 1-2

The Switch has proven to be something of a haven for shmup fans, and a number of fantastic shooters are currently available on the system. NIS America has certainly noticed this market and is releasing not one but two compilations dedicated to Psikyo's classic arcade shooters. This isn't the first retro compilation that NIS America has released on the Switch either, as it dropped *SNK 40th Anniversary Collection* in 2018. Unfortunately, while that was a sterling example of how to treat a bunch of classic games, *Psikyo Shooting Stars Alpha* proves to be a disappointing bedfellow.

That's not to say the included games are poor. In fact, every single one of the six titles is worthy of your time, even *Sol Divide* – which is arguably the weakest game on offer – but as a celebration piece *Shooting Stars Alpha* is rather lacking. There are no history archives to look through, no posters or digital art books to gaze at, nothing at all apart from the six games themselves. So let us take this opportunity to go through each one of them.

The highlight of *Alpha* is easily *Zero Gunner 2* – an exhilarating horizontal blaster which puts you in the cockpit of a high-tech helicopter. The control system admittedly takes a while to adjust to, but once you do you'll be mowing down waves of enemies with ease and pulling apart the gigantic bosses that reside at the end of each stage. It's fast and frantic and is the newest game on the compilation (it was originally ported from arcade to Dreamcast in 2001).

As we mentioned above, the weak link here is *Sol Divide*, a fantasy-fuelled blaster with smart prerendered visuals and a focus on melee combat that puts it somewhat at odds with the rest of the included games. The large oversized characters feel like they attract incoming bullets, but once you get used to their pace and the size of their hitboxes you'll soon begin to appreciate just how far Psikyo attempted to push the conventional shmup envelope with this interesting oddity.

Far more enjoyable and a lot more accessible is *Dragon Blaze*, a charming

BRIEF HISTORY

» Psikyo was set up in 1992 and quickly built a name for itself by releasing a number of quality shoot-'em-ups, including the *Sengoku* and *Strikers* franchises. While the company went under in the early Noughties, its games remain extremely popular. In addition to separate digital releases, all 12 Psikyo shooters were released in Japan, firstly split across three releases of four games and then as twin packs, which are nearly identical to the NIS America releases.

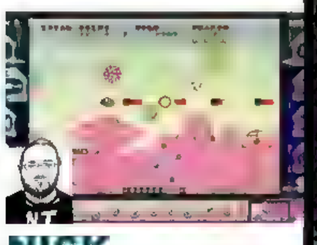
» [Switch] *Strikers 1945* is best described as '*1943* on steroids'. It's big, bold and brash.

★ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Sega Ages: Shinobi

Another excellent offering from M2 as you'd expect. The new rewind feature is perfect for acing the famous bonus stage, too.



NICK

Sega Ages: Fantasy Zone

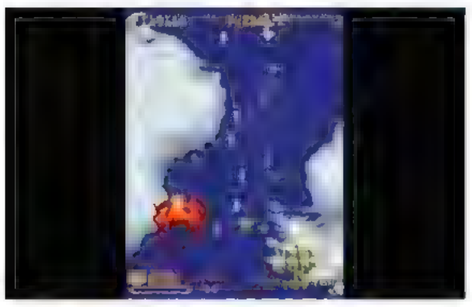
This impressive M2 port will save me a fortune in *Yakuza*, where I've been playing *Fantasy Zone* in virtual arcades.

» [Switch] None of the games can be classed as 'bullet hell' but *Dragon Blaze* does like to chuck the projectiles about.

*WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD

CAPCOM CLASSICS COLLECTION REMIXED (PSP)



▼ SOMETHING NEW

ARCADE CLASSICS ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION (SWITCH)

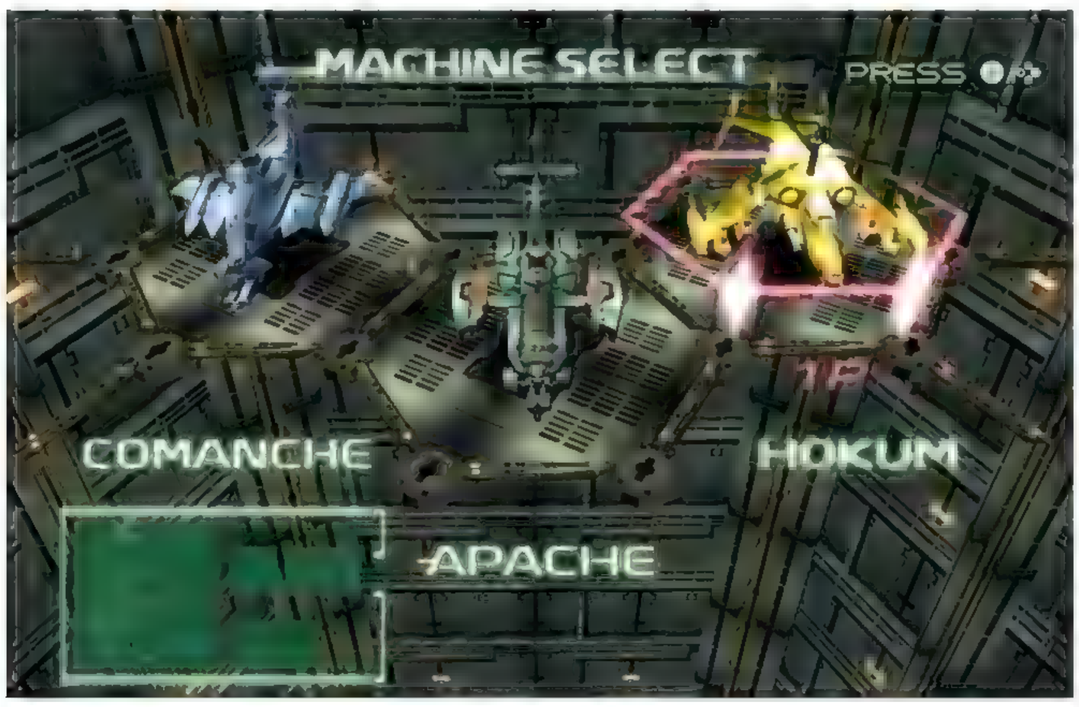
little vertical shoot-'em-up that also boasts a fantasy theme. It's a lot more conventional than *Sol Divide*, though and has more in common with the other vertical shooters that share space on the collection. There are four different characters to master and the scoring system is solid, but won't present many headaches if you're a high score chaser.

Shooting Stars Alpha's final three games are from the *Strikers* series and include *Strikers 1945*, *Strikers 1945 II* and *Strikers 1945 III*. All three vertical shooters play very similarly to one another and have a distinctive World War 2 motif that will instantly remind you of Capcom's venerable *1945* series. There's a lot more on offer here, however, thanks to a large number of different craft to master in each game and the ridiculous bosses that start off as gigantic planes, ships and other vehicles, before transforming into gargantuan bullet-spewing hellions.

Although the *Striker* games and *Dragon Blaze* feel very similar from a mechanical point of view, *Zero Gunner 2* and *Sol Divide* do a great job of breaking up the compilation's familiarity. None of the games have particularly complex scoring systems, but they're all challenging enough that it should take a fair amount of practice before you successfully single-credit them, if at all.

All the included ports are of a high standard and appear identical to the ones that are already available on the eShop as separate downloads. As a result, each game has a variety of tweakable options that range from different filters (including adding scanlines) and screen sizes, to the handy ability to customise buttons and use Tate options on the four vertical games. The only downside to this last option is that you can't play off a single Joy-Con, meaning you'll find things very difficult indeed if you've recently moved over to a Switch Lite.

So that brings us to the rather hefty price tag that *Shooting Stars Alpha* sports. With all six games already available separately at £6.99, there's a good chance you may already own some of the games on offer and you're saving very little by buying them as a collection. Add in the fact that Konami's *Contra* and *Castlevania* compilations offer more games for around half the price and NIS America's compilation starts to look very expensive for a digital release. A physical version does exist, but that's even pricier due to only being available as a limited edition set (which admittedly includes three CDs, a nice artbook and various cards). If both packages were combined as a single 12-game compilation we'd be a bit more lenient, but as it stands it just feels cynically overpriced. *



» [Switch] Every featured game features multiple craft to master, meaning there's a lot of longevity.

In a nutshell

There's a decent selection of games on offer here, but it looks decidedly poor value when placed up against Konami's recent range of mini compilations and NIS America's own SNK collection. You'd be better off buying the individual titles on a case by case basis instead.

>> Score **69%**

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

If you absolutely have to own a physical release of *Shooting Stars Alpha* then it's possible to buy a special edition of the game directly from NIS America's European store. While it does cost £54.99 it comes with some extras that are sure to delight fans of the games. The main draw is *Alpha Code Blue*, a three-CD set which features the soundtracks of all six games (which are all very good, we must add). A set of large art cards are also included for each game while the collection itself comes with a neat reversible cover. The last thing included in the limited edition is a rather small art book called *Art Schematics*, which features a selection of some of the bosses you can expect to fight.

» [Switch] *Zero Gunner 2* has some sensational bosses, including this one which clambers up buildings.

PICK OF THE MONTH

Sega Ages: Shinobi

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £5.99

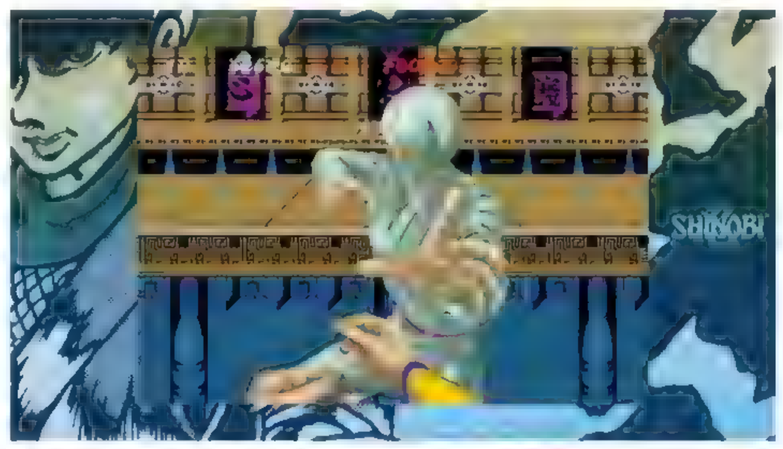
We've been constantly impressed with M2's emulation work on the *Sega Ages* series and its latest pair of titles (*Shinobi* and *Fantasy Zone*) are excellent. In case you're unaware of Sega's classic, *Shinobi* casts you as Joe Musashi, a deadly ninja who has been tasked with bringing down the criminal 'Zeed' organisation. Armed with an unlimited supply of throwing stars and the ability to unleash a devastating magic attack during each stage, Joe must fight his way through hordes of enemies, rescuing kids as he goes. In addition to his weapons, Joe also has access to a handy super jump which lets him leap between floors, meaning it's far easier to avoid enemy fire. While it's a relatively dormant franchise (the last new game was released in 2011) the original game remains incredibly popular amongst fans and it's been given some quality care from the tech wizards at M2.

As you'd expect, the attention to detail just from an options point of view is staggering, and it greatly eclipses the efforts of ZeroDiv's shooter collection that we've reviewed this month. There are numerous display options, you can switch between the international and Japanese versions of the game, choose the option to select stages, alter the speed of enemies projectiles and even emulate an old arcade screen. The emulation appears faultless, but it's the new Ages Mode that will appeal to most players. *Shinobi* has always been a tough game so M2 has allowed Joe to take an additional hit before he dies. In this mode he starts off with a white suit, which turns red upon taking a hit. To make things even easier you can now rewind time by pressing the ZL or ZR buttons during play (this works in both Ages mode and Arcade mode). You don't have to use this if you don't want to, but it certainly makes those pesky bonus stages a lot easier to complete.

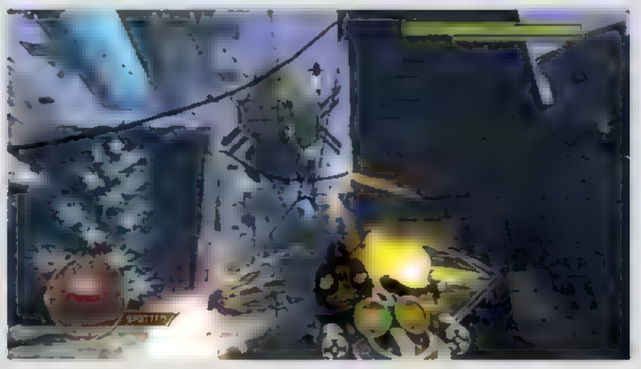
Add in an amusing credits sequence and *Shinobi* is another quality addition to M2's new Switch range. It's not quite the jaw-dropper that *Virtua Racing* is, but it is the best way you can experience the game short of buying an original arcade board.

» Score **86%**

»[Switch] M2 has done everything to increase *Shinobi*'s accessibility, including slowing down bullets.



»[Switch] If you can't complete *Shinobi*'s bonus stage with the new rewind feature you might as well stop playing games.



Stranger's Wrath HD

» **System:** Switch
» **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £26.99

We've always had a soft spot for *Stranger's Wrath* and we've enjoyed every HD remake that the game has received. This Switch port feels very similar to the earlier HD offerings that are available, but does add new gyroscopic controls that can be used in both first and third-person modes. They're decent enough, but didn't feel as precise as traditional stick controls, and we soon switched back to the original setup. Navigating *Stranger Wrath*'s large world and gathering up bounties is still as satisfying as it ever was and the game runs at a decent pace, but there's no denying that this feels expensive at nearly £30, particularly when you consider the wealth of decent adventure games that are already on Nintendo's system.

» Score **78%**

NBA Jam (Book)

» **Buy it from:** amazon.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £11.38

If any game can be said to be representative of arcade-style sports games as a subgenre, $1 billion in earnings means *NBA Jam* must be that game. Reyan Ali has done a great job of chronicling the creation of the game and the culture surrounding it, talking to everyone from the developers to motion capture artists, strategy guide authors and even NBA legends in an attempt to create the definitive history of Midway's monster hit. However, it goes considerably beyond that, providing background on arcade sports games, Midway, the NBA and the individual developers, with plenty of great personal colour regarding Mark Turmell in particular. It's fascinating to read about how Midway lost the *NBA Jam* series soon after creating it, before crashing out of arcades and eventually the entire industry.

Sega Ages: Fantasy Zone

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online
» **Buy it for:** £5.99

***Fantasy Zone* is an excellent early example of the cute-'em-up, and M2 has given it the usual helping of *Sega Ages* love here, with solid emulation and some neat additions.** A base map and indicators to the left and right of the playfield enhance the main game, while Upa-Upa mode allows you to switch weapons as long as you have money, and Time Attack mode removes scoring and just ranks players on their speed. Unlockable bonuses include the ability to fight the Master System's extra bosses. It's a commendable package overall, with the only real knock on it being that most of the additional features were present in the 3DS version of *Fantasy Zone*, so there's not too much that's actually new here.

» Score **86%**

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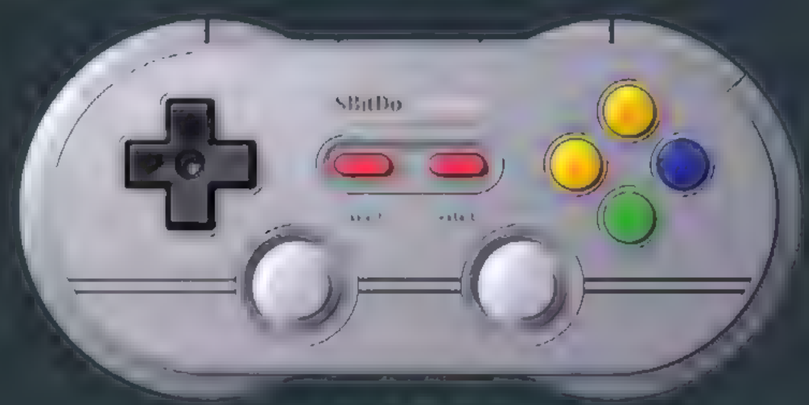

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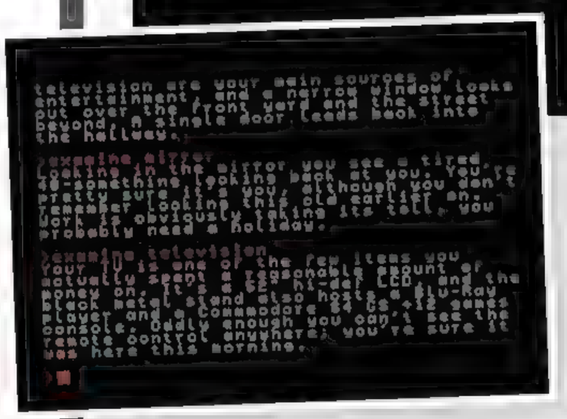
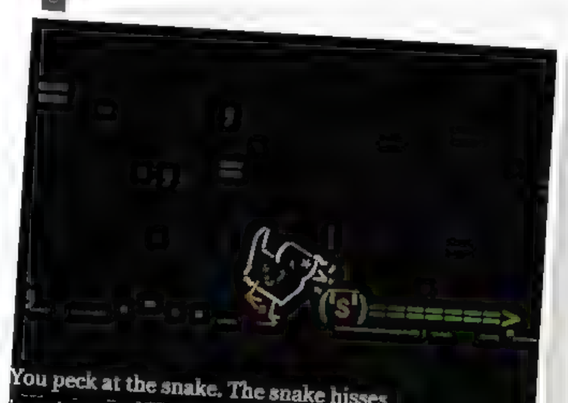


» [Amstrad CPC] Pottering around the front room in *Unhallowed* and finding a C64GS.



» [C64] Roguelike action – with extra toad punching – in *Trogue64*.

ADVENTURING WE WILL GO

***Unhallowed* is an adventure originally developed by Blerkotronic Software.** The player's character is on their way home from work during Halloween with nothing in mind for the evening past spending it staring at the gogglebox, but there's something dark waiting for them, which has plans of its own. The original release of this game was for 128K Spectrums but, thanks to the efforts of Puddle Software's Stefan Vogt, the story has recently been converted to the C64, Plus/4 and Amstrad CPC. More information on all of the versions, including a HTML version for Javascript browsers can be found at Kikstart.me.uk/unhallowed and a physical release courtesy of Bitmap Soft should be available by the time this issue is out – the website is BitmapSoft.co.uk.

Continuing with the text-based theme we'd like to shed a spotlight on the Text Only Jam over at Itch.io, and, as the name suggests, all of the entries had to use ASCII characters throughout. The most obvious approach for devs, considering that limitation, would be to create text adventures or role-playing games – and there's a few of those, including *Larry The Dragon* for the former or *Adventures Of Lohikaarme, The Dragon Warrior* as an example of the latter, but some of the more creative ideas are just as interesting. *The Dragon Races* is like a horse racing simulation where bets can be placed before the race plays out in ASCII characters with narration.

Summoner's Dungeon is an interesting idea, taking elements from various sources including *Scrabble* and *Dungeons & Dragons* while challenging the player to find three, four or five-letter words to vanquish monsters, but the dictionary used seems to be quite limited.

Speaking of *D&D*, one of the more meta titles is *Dice & Ducks* where the player becomes a waterfowl who, after frightening off a group of children, finds itself playing the tabletop game they left behind when running away and getting unexpectedly caught up in the action, honking and pecking enemies during battles or meditating to recover from injuries. This and all of the other entries are available from Kikstart.me.uk/text-only-jam.

Adventurers might also want to try *Trogue64*, a roguelike for the C64 that's set in what was until recently a flooded mine. The water was keeping a horde of zombies at bay since the Eighties, so our hero needs to find pumps… but not so many that the mine fills too quickly. Kikstart.me.uk/trogue-c64 will take you there.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

HOMEBREW HEROES

Since he'd finished coding Muncher Mouse, we decided to try tempting Colecovision coder Jean-Philippe Meola into doing an interview using some oversized strawberries and mushrooms. It worked surprisingly well!

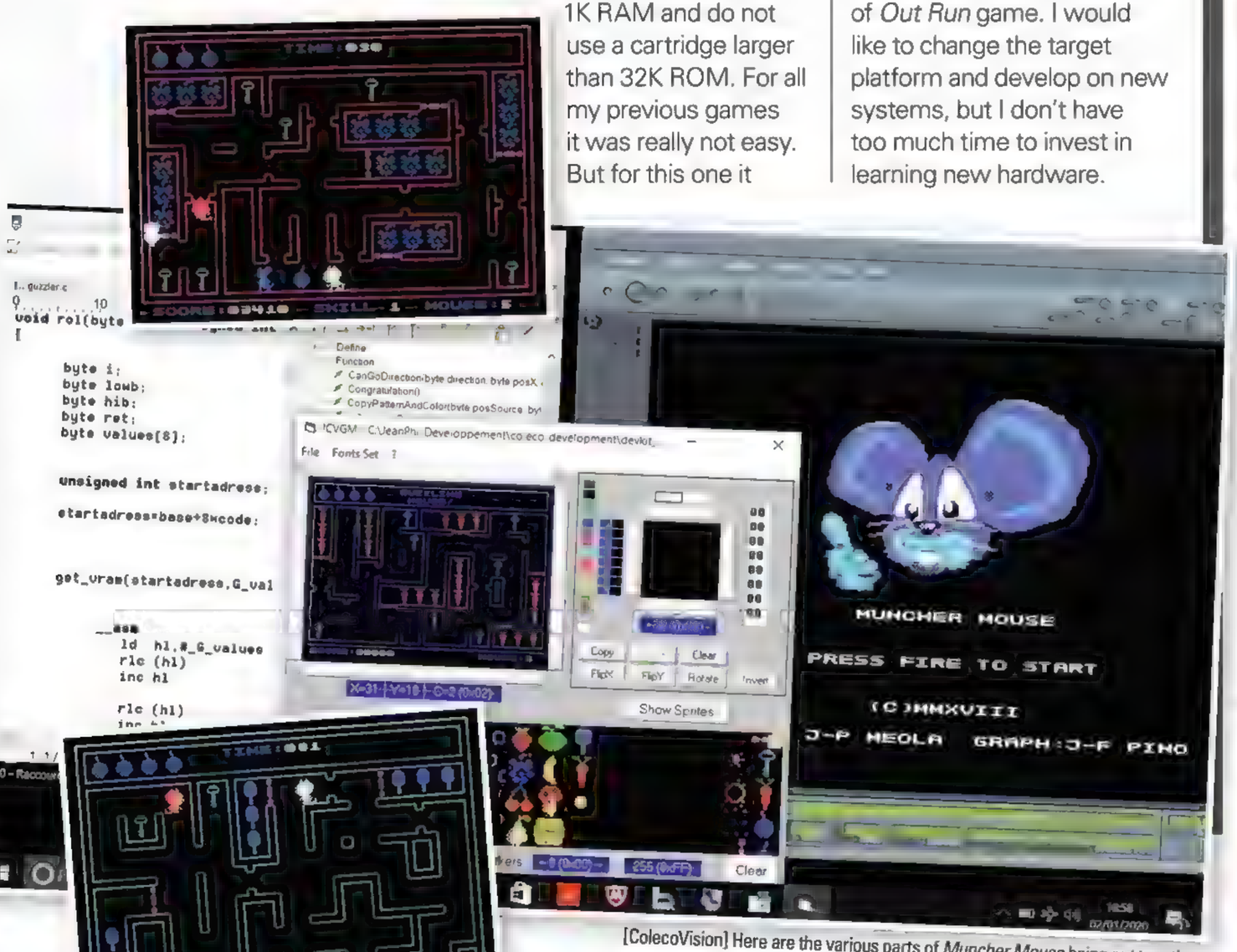
So where did the idea for *Muncher Mouse* originally come from?
I'm a huge fan of the Commodore 64. And I spend lot of my time on the Lemon64 website. Each time you come on the website you have a random game which is displayed. I [like] to refresh the page until I see a game that I don't know yet and I try it. One day, a game named *Guzzler* appeared. It was fun, and I had already done a little game that could be used as a base. So, I have reinterpreted *Guzzler* my way to create *Muncher Mouse*. As the hero was a mouse, I have naturally put cats as enemies. And I did not find something more natural than a toilet to 'empty' the mouse after having eaten too much.

Who was involved in the development and how long did it take?
Lots of people helped me on that project: Jeff Pino for the graphics, Cyril Denis for the music. Patrice Rucar for the publishing part, Vincent Godefroy for the packaging design and David Frost for the beta testing phase. It took around 300 hours.

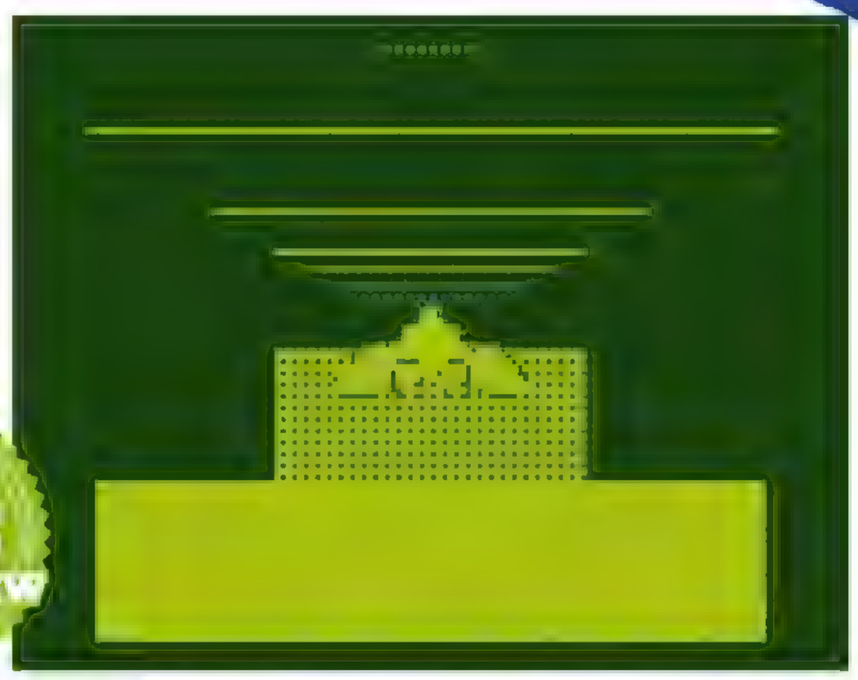
How difficult is getting a game like this running on the ColecoVision?
It was not difficult, this kind of game is well suited for the ColecoVision. It is a little game. The most critical part is to correctly handle sprite flickering when more than four sprites are on the same row. Knowing that sprites are monochrome on ColecoVision, if you want to do a two-colour sprite, as I do in the game, you need to superpose two monochrome sprites, in *Muncher Mouse* you can have eight sprites on the row. The challenge is to optimise the flickering in a way it is ideally not perceptible. For all my games I make a point of honour that it could have been released in 1982. It means it should run on a stock ColecoVision with 1K RAM and do not use a cartridge larger than 32K ROM. For all my previous games it was really not easy. But for this one it was perfect. It is even the first game where I still have a few bytes available on the cartridge.

What kind of feedback has *Muncher Mouse* received from gamers?
Until now, it is very good. Most of feedback is that the game is fun and addictive. And we have had a lot of good feedback about the packaging. I must admit that Coté Gamers (the publisher), as always, did some very impressive work.

And finally, have you any future plans our readers might be interested in?
I have too many plans… I have four projects on the ColecoVision I have started but not yet completed – the more ambitious being a kind of *Out Run* game. I would like to change the target platform and develop on new systems, but I don't have too much time to invest in learning new hardware.



[ColecoVision] Here are the various parts of *Muncher Mouse* being put together.



THAT'S NO MOON

[Game Boy] Zooming forwards through an impressive but deadly 3D environment.

The ominous sounding *Death Planet* is a vast battle station around the size of a small moon, built by the Galactic Empire as part of its ongoing plan to subjugate the universe.
As a well-trained rebel pilot ,the task of destroying this significant threat to galactic peace falls to you and it's not going to be easy.

We haven't played it enough to see if the gameplay matches its impressive visuals, but *Death Planet* looks amazing in motion and really looks to be pushing the Game Boy's hardware much further than recent titles we've seen. Fly to Kikstart.me.uk/death-planet-gb for more information and the download.

TOTALLY MANIC

[C64] Going back down t'pit with Miner Willy in search of treasure.

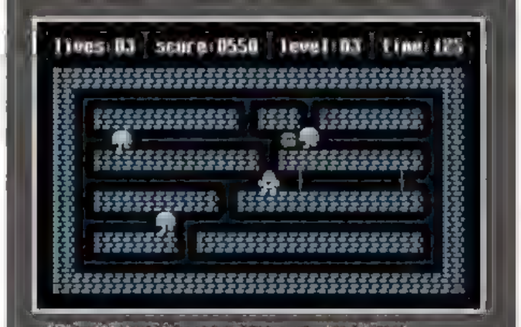
***Manic Miner* on the Spectrum is a seminal classic but, because not everybody feels so strongly about the C64 conversion, programmer Toki decided that he wanted to create a more faithful mining experience.**

The result is *Manic Miner 64DX* and, along with gaining a beefed up soundtrack, adding some presentation screens and not having colour clash on the main sprite, this looks to be a pretty faithful version. There are also trainer options available for anyone who feels they're necessary and the original C64 conversion is included for comparison. Head to Kikstart.me.uk/mm64dx-c64.

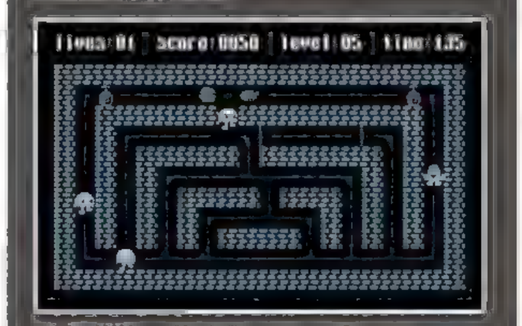
DO YOU REMEMBER?

Released in 2003 by Gábor 'Skoro' Varga, *Fast Food* on the Plus/4 is an extremely loose interpretation of the game of the same name from other 8-bit systems. In this version the pieces of food don't move around the playfield and instead act as barriers, limiting where the patrolling nasties are able to go within the maze. This means that, as the player gathers items needed to finish a stage, the chances of a fatal collision constantly increase.

Once the maze is clear, returning to base will cause the level to end but the random enemy movement makes things tricky, and the player has to watch precious seconds tick away each time they're waiting for a specific part of the map to empty before nipping over for a quick snack. Go to Kikstart.me.uk/fast-food-264



» [Plus/4] Just the one item to go, but there's a baddie hanging around.



» [Plus/4] Items block the maze, so the more you collect the harder things get.

» [MSX] A chain of nasties coming from behind and laser-firing ships in front.

UCHUSEN GAMMA

PLATFORM: MSX » **DEVELOPER:** JUAN J MARTÍNEZ » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/UCHUSEN-GAMMA-MSX » **PRICE:** FREE DOWNLOAD, CARTRIDGE £TBA

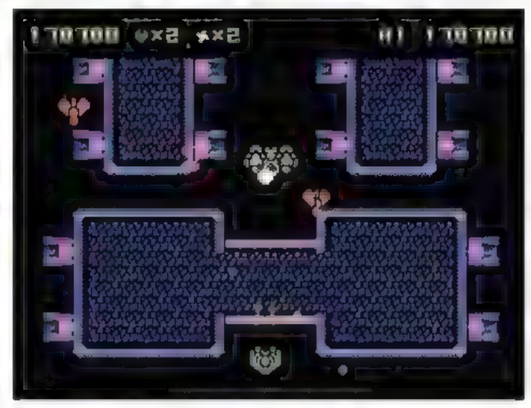
The Galactic Empire is in a pretty sorry state after its emperor passes away and doesn't name a successor. The military has stepped in but isn't doing a particularly good job and some of the outer colonies are constantly under attack, with cyborg raiders from the Mion system causing devastation wherever they appear. The Empire isn't going to help, so the task is left to one Gamma model spaceship and a pilot itching for a major if somewhat one-sided battle.

Trying to take on an entire attacking force single-handedly might seem foolhardy at first glance, but the Gamma is at least a well-armed craft. The primary weapon starts out at a reasonable strength and items occasionally dropped by cyborg raiders as they're destroyed will power it up further. The secondary weapon is a very limited stock of extremely useful, screen-clearing Nova bombs, these are best saved for emergencies and more can be gathered from downed enemies.

The only problem is that these useful toys are only released by blasting a chain of enemies, and although that's sometimes easy to do, properly taking advantage of all the potential weapon enhancements on offer involves learning attack patterns and working out the optimal time to blast your foes in order to effectively keep chains going. As an extra incentive, enemies destroyed as part of a chain are worth more points for those who don't feel that saving the beleaguered colonies was enough of a reward already.

Uchusen Gamma is a technically impressive title which offers silky-smooth background scrolling with a significant number of enemies and bullets overlaid onto it but, more importantly, a lot of thought has gone into the gameplay as well. It's possible to simply dive in and blast away at the enemies but, along with figuring out where to build chains for power-ups, the secret for long-term success revolves around learning how each attack pattern moves and when the enemies will launch bullets in order to simultaneously keep the Gamma in range to attack and out of harm's way.

» Score **92%**

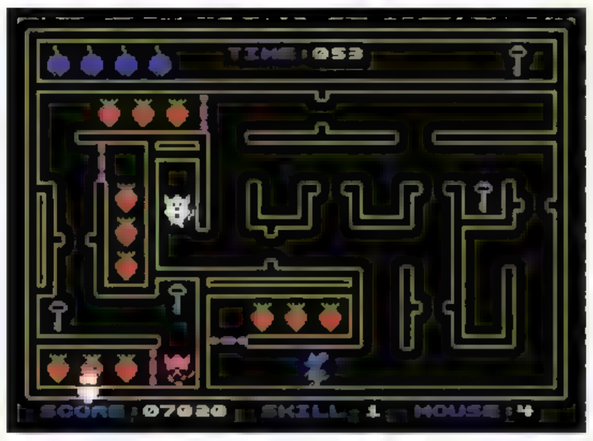


[MSX] Each level is busier than its predecessor and everything gets more trigger-happy.

» [MSX] Bullets everywhere, and most of the enemies have good aim.

MUNCHER MOUSE

PLATFORM: COLECOVISION » **DEVELOPER:** JEAN-PHILIPPE MEOLA » **DL:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/MUNCHER-CV
PRICE: €42.00 ON CARTRIDGE

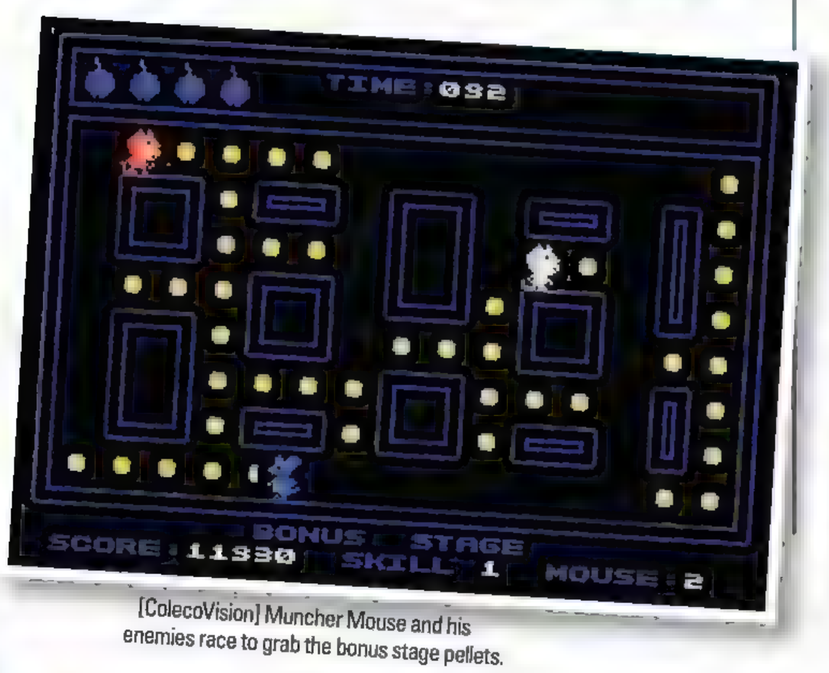


[ColecoVision] Strawberry fields forever, or at least until they're all eaten.

Ever since *Pac-Man*, maze-based games have encouraged gluttony, but *Muncher Mouse* has a slightly different take on the formula. The titular hero is trapped in a maze with some enemies but, although there are clusters of fruit to consume once the doors they're behind are unlocked, doing so makes the poor rodent gain weight so he stops eating and can't move through tighter parts of the maze.

To alleviate this problem, there's a toilet wandering around the edges of the screen which can flush the weight away when touched. Waiting for relief can sometimes be hazardous, but the mouse also has a stock of bombs which will temporarily deal with his pursuers. *Muncher Mouse* would already be fun without this extra depth, and it's possible to survive on good reflexes alone, but taking a moment to find the safest and most optimal approach to each stage is even more rewarding.

» Score **88%**



[ColecoVision] Muncher Mouse and his enemies race to grab the bonus stage pellets.

RUNNER BEAR

PLATFORM: ATARI 8-BIT » **DEVELOPER:** PLAYSOFT AND FRIENDS
PRICE: FREE » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/RUNNER-BEAR-A8

The charming world Bentley Bear finds himself in is brightly coloured and friendly-looking, but also loaded with danger and, rather than hang around, our hero starts running away with no plans to stop. That means leaping over holes in the constantly scrolling background and either avoiding the enemies or taking them out with some honey.

Fast reactions are important here but learning where the various perils lie is also a must since they often require some fairly precise timing to avoid. It'll also help to size up the nasties and decide when they're best avoided. Dipping into the very limited honey supply is a good idea, too, since top-ups can be found but they're few and far between.

If things prove too difficult there's always the option of playing as the dragon, since she can't collide with the enemies and only has to worry about clearing the chasms.

» Score **84%**

[Atari 8-bit] Many of the jumps need some accurate timing to execute safely.

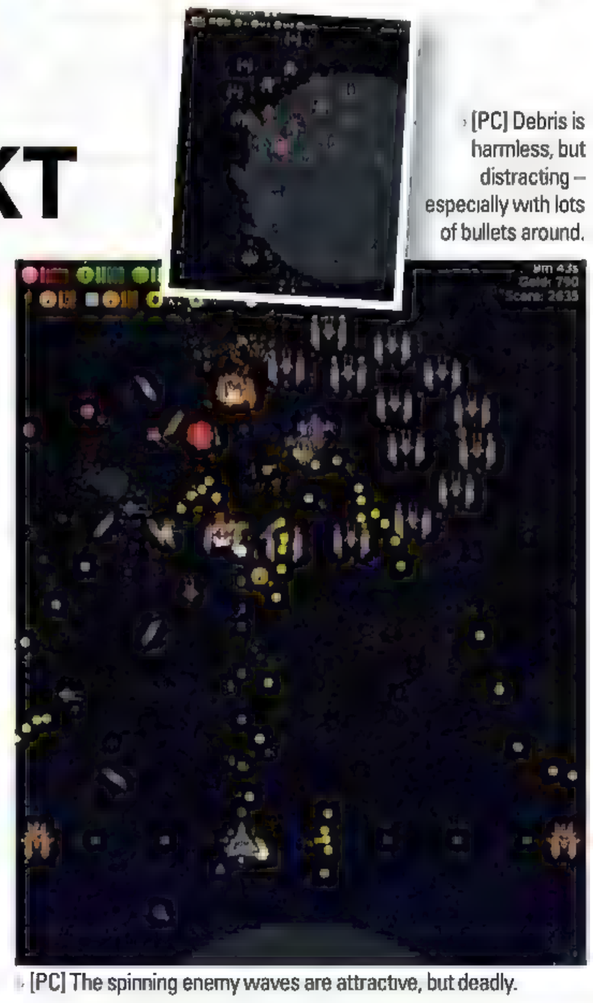
GIT GUD OR GET REKT

PLATFORM: PC (STEAM) » **DEVELOPER:** IQ SOFTWARE
DOWNLOAD: KIKSTART.ME.UK/GIT-GUD-STEAM » **PRICE:** FREE

The developer describes this as "one of the hardest games on Steam" and the lowest difficulty setting available is 'hard', which ties in with the title. The player just gets a peashooter to begin with and one life which can survive a finite number of hits, but these can be improved by items left behind by downed nasties, which can also provide super weapons for when conventional guns aren't enough.

One unusual feature for a game like this is the XP system, where points are awarded after each game, and, when the player levels up, a new start bonus item is unlocked for use in future attempts. The randomisation of weapon enhancements make each game different, but that also means it's difficult to formulate strategies. That's not necessarily bad, though, even if it can prove frustrating, so players will find often themselves being wrecked only to start again looking for revenge.

» Score **72%**


[PC] Debris is harmless, but distracting – especially with lots of bullets around.

[PC] The spinning enemy waves are attractive, but deadly.

ROUNDUP

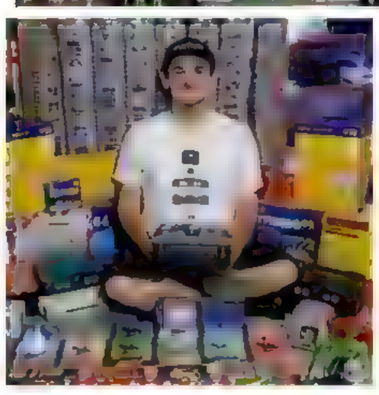
Written for the Plus/4 as part of the RetroProgramming Italia Lander Challenge, *Mars+ Lander* hands the player control of a craft heading down to a base on the surface of the red planet, controlling the descent and lining up with the pad while keeping one eye on the fuel gauge and avoiding asteroids. Don't expect an easy landing though, because the positioning needs to be very precise. Pilot your craft to Kikstart.me.uk/mars-plus-264.

DKJ Game & Watch is based on the *Donkey Kong Jr* handheld outing and developer Nick Sherman has released it on a number of Commodore 8-bit platforms. The one we're showcasing is the Plus/4 version – which is available from Kikstart.me.uk/dkj-gw-264 – that was released late last year, but ports also exist for the VIC-20, C64 and PET.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH THE RETRO KEYHOLE

N64DD KEYBOARD
"One of the coolest things you can plug into the N64, a full keyboard. Sadly, it only came out in Japan and is hard to find."
PAID: $650



DOUBLING DOWN

Carl Sammons on collecting for the N64 and N64DD

BIO

NAME:
Carl Sammons

LOCATION:
South New Jersey

FAVOURITE CONSOLE:
Nintendo 64

FAVOURITE GAME:
Castlevania 64

Our latest tenant of Collector's Corner is a rather interesting case, as he's the first collector we've featured who is the same age as the system he collects. "I was born the year the N64 came out (1996) and my parents had bought me a N64 when I was young, and I very faintly remember playing it, until they traded it in for a PlayStation," he tells us. "I was pretty upset, because I loved *Zelda* and *Castlevania*." The memories Carl had for the N64 never disappeared and he picked one up after exchanging it for a broken Xbox 360 that he owned. According to Carl that simple trade "started the fire for collecting" again.

And collect Carl did, diligently picking up all the games that he'd enjoyed as a kid, while discovering plenty of new ones as well. Although he only started collecting for the system a few years ago, he's already amassed an incredible collection having just recently completed the entire US library of games (that's 296, in case you were wondering). Interestingly, Carl is more focused on owning the games, rather than worrying if they are complete in boxes. "Right now, I can only collect loose carts, that's because I am simply out of room," he tells us. "I would like to one day possibly go for complete boxed games, but just due to space, loose carts it is. It does make it handy with [custom] end-labels [making it easy to] find the game you want to play quickly, and not have to worry about damaging a box getting a game out."

It's not just the N64 that Carl collects for, he also has a huge fascination for the system's failed add-on as well, the Nintendo 64DD after discovering the expansion port on the N64 he had traded in and wondering what it was used for. "Now that I'm older I'm able to acquire these things I dreamed about back in high school," he tells us. "I learned of the very niche collector group for the 64DD which I wanted to be a part of, because there are so many other great collectors for the 64DD, and its such a great conversation piece. I love answering questions for people who may have never even seen one or never thought they existed." Carl is one of the few DD collectors out there with a complete library of retail games, something he's proud of, particularly when you consider how expensive *Doshin The Giant 2* and *Japan Pro Golf Tour 64* are. Carl puts his collection down to "patience, saving, and keeping an eye open and posting in the Nintendo 64 Super Group on Facebook".

So what advice does Carl have for those wanting to amass their own N64 collections? "The best advice I can give is be patient," he concludes. "There were a few times I was impatient and could have got a better deal on something if I had just waited another week or so. Also keep a watch on the Facebook marketplace, there are often people unloading their attic finds for cheap, and you're able to pick up good bundles for great prices."

BUNG DOCTOR V64
"A funky-looking add-on that can play video CDs and music CDs, it was actually used to develop one of the *Turok* games!"
PAID: $500

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

NINTENDO 64DD PROTOTYPE DEVELOPMENT UNIT WITH BLUE DISK

PAID: "WAY TOO MUCH!"

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

PC ENGINE MINI

Konami's new range of shrunken-down systems isn't even out yet so you can still preorder one for **£99** from Amazon. If you'd rather own the real deal, a bare system starts around **£50**, with boxed versions starting from **£100**. We'd recommend one with an RGB mod, though, which ups the price somewhat.

THE LEGEND OF THE MYSTICAL NINJA

PAL and US cartridges typically start at **£25**. A complete US version goes for around the **£40** mark while the full PAL version can go as high as **£200**. The Japanese version is perfectly playable and sells for **£30** complete.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Prices for this varies across the Spectrum, Amstrad and C64, but the double cassette version typically tops out at the **£10** mark. The Hit Squad version, on the Spectrum at least, typically sells for around **£**.

PHANTASY STAR

If you want a PAL copy of Sega's acclaimed RPG you'll need plenty of spare change. You're unlikely to get a cartridge for less than **£35**, while a fully boxed copy can cost **£**.

HARDWARE HUNT

Game Boy Colors are still pretty cheap. If you're not fussed about a box you can buy one of these colour handhelds for around the **£25** mark. Boxed ones start around **£50**, while variants like the *Pokémon* version sell for around **£**.

DEAD SPACE: EXTRACTION

This excellent lightgun game for the Wii shouldn't cost you no more than a tenner. It's currently **£8** at CEX, but there's no guarantee it will be complete.

GAROU: MARK OF THE WOLVES

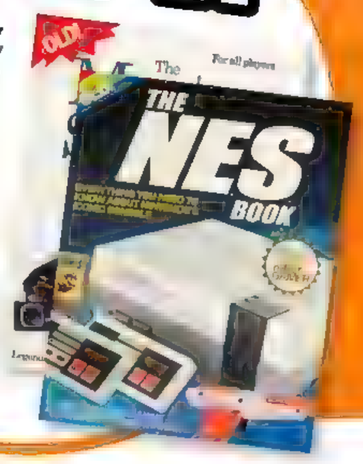
The prices of Neo Geo games are often high, but a recent copy of *Garou* certainly had us twitching. A starting price of a single Euro certainly caught the attention of several collectors and 12 different bidders pushed the price to a staggering **£1,567.99** (just over **£3,000**!)

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON THE ONLINE FORUM – WWW.RETROGAMER.NET

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of either our NES/Master System or SNES/Mega Drive books



STAR LETTER

CAUGHT IN THE WEB

Hello again **Retro Gamer,**
In 2014 I sent the email below about an unknown space shooter I remembered playing in the Eighties. You awarded it the Star Letter in (I think) Issue 134 back in October 2014 with the headline 'Spider Stumper'. No one was able to identify it.

"The game had a space ship with four large missiles mounted on the sides which you could fire as well as the usual laser gun," I wrote. "You flew over the typical mountain background and the main enemy were large spiders that span weblines across the screen which you had to shoot your way through."

Back then people thought I was either making it up, insane or just completely wrong as the follow-up letters suggested in issue 135. As a result of that star letter I was forced into exile from society as a laughing stock, and had to live in shame by myself in the wilderness for over five years, having been shunned by friends, family and the retro gaming community. While playing MAME in my handmade wooden cabin deep in the woods, I finally found that space shooter, the fabled Spider Stumper itself. It's called *Scorpion* – it's actually still really good and obviously something of a forgotten gem.

Maybe you could do an article on it to bring it back to the attention of retro gamers everywhere? I might even be able to leave my cabin and return to modern society. Domino's Pizza won't deliver to me this far out…

Wow! We honestly never expected to see this mystery finally solved, so congratulations for finding your answer at long last. We had a quick go and we agree, it's good fun – there's a lot of variety there for a shooter of that vintage. We'll look to cover it soon. Until then, please celebrate your societal reintegration with a bookazine.

» Phil enjoyed our interview with Alex 'Big Boy' Barry. Very much so, and wants more of them. What do you think?

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE BOY

Dear **Retro Gamer,**
I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the interview with Big Boy Barry in your last issue. It was exactly the kind of feature I like to read in your magazine. It was fun, it had good stories, it was nostalgic and 'Barry' didn't take himself too seriously!

I would really enjoy more interviews like this. Some of your features can get very technical and overly focused on the detail of making games. This is fine, but most of us are not coders. The thing we want to read about is just the nostalgic, carefree fun of gaming.

How about a feature interviewing retro gamers on their gaming experiences in their youth and favourite retro games now? I want to hear more about enjoying the games than how exactly they were made!

» [illegible]

Thanks for the letter Phil, we're glad to hear you liked that interview. You raise an interesting point about the level of technical detail we go into. We'll always include some tech talk as there are definitely readers that appreciate those deep dives, but we're keen on finding the right balance. Readers, please let us know how you feel about this.

POCKET PLEASE

Hello **Retro Gamer** Team!
I have been a long-time follower of your magazine (eight or nine years now!), and I wanted to ask about two things that I don't recall you guys have covered in full detail as of yet.

Would you be able to cover the Neo Geo Pocket Color and its small but great games? I noticed that the interest in the machine is increasing a lot lately, and I would love to hear your thoughts about the system, as well as its small but significant history in the US/UK and Japan!

I also think you should look into *Shin Megami Tensei* series as an article – before *Persona* became the star of the show. I bet a lot of people who got into the *Persona* games would love to read about the early days of Atlus' demon-summoning series and how it got to *Persona*!

Hi Adrian, great to hear you're enjoying the magazine. Both of those sound good. We haven't covered *Shin Megami Tensei* before, but the Neo Geo Pocket Color was one of our very earliest Retroinspection features, way back in issue 20. There's definitely room to take another look at it though, and we like the system – rumour has it that Nick and Darran once did battle on *SNK Vs Capcom: Card Fighters' Clash* in a KFC. [I lost - Ed]

ALLEY CAT

Dear **Retro Gamer,**
I'm slowly savouring and enjoying your 200th anniversary issue and I just reached your article on the history of videogaming magazines. I'm learning a lot from it. However, I believe you missed an important thread in the history of videogaming journalism: the column 'Arcade Alley', which began in 1979 in *Video* magazine and which

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Email: [redacted]

then became *Electronic Games* in 1981. This was a US publication that launched shortly after *Computer & Video Games* in the UK in the same year. It's another example of how those of us in different countries lived in parallel videogaming universes not fully aware of each other in that era.
Ben F Star

Thanks for writing in, Ben. Bill Kunkel and Arnie Katz certainly definitely deserve their credit for Arcade Alley, and the columns are interesting to look at today, especially for their approach to imagery – recreating images due to the lack of video capture hardware shows some dedication! As you rightly point out, its omission is an example of the kind of independent regional history that has been lost in this age of globalisation.

CLASSIC CONSULTATION

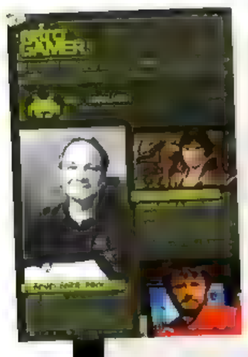
Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I'm aware licences can restrict what can be included on mini consoles, but Sony missed a trick by flogging out a console that didn't match its predecessor just to sell numbers. They could have asked us what games would help make it a hit, and also what tech is needed to enable wider TV compatibility. Talk about shooting themselves in their own feet
[redacted]

That's a tricky one. As you point out, licensing was a problem for Sony with the PlayStation Classic, and we're not sure how much market research could help with that – after all, being told that players want *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* doesn't make the prospect of getting it any easier. Besides, we still think the games included were mostly pretty good, *Battle Arena Toshinden* excepted. For us, the technical performance was a far bigger problem, due to the weak hardware and bizarre inclusion of 50Hz PAL games. Hopefully companies will learn from Sony's mistake, as well as the way the Mega Drive Mini has erased the memories of AtGames' lacklustre clone systems. Ultimately, gamers want their games to run to an acceptable standard.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

When I'm 64
Our Man In Charge has a new retro obsession, and this time it's the Nintendo 64, with a new package of games arriving more or less every day. He has quickly amassed a formidable collection of games, picking up the classics at a terrifying rate – over the course of three weeks he's managed to acquire the likes of *Super Mario 64*, *GoldenEye 007*, *Pokémon Snap* and *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, most of them in great condition. In fact, the main reason Darran wrote the *Banjo-Kazooie* spread for this issue was because he was playing it at the time!

» [redacted]



Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know...

How much does nostalgia play a part in your retro gaming?

RetroBob
Nostalgia for the games I enjoyed years ago is a major reason I love retro gaming – I love playing those old games, even those that aren't that good, as it takes me back. It's also a jumping off point to then go on to play other games that I perhaps wanted to play but couldn't afford, or just interesting games that totally passed me by. The PC Engine Mini is a great example of this – I'd never even seen a PC Engine growing up but I have got one preordered!

Gordon Sinclair
It is probably about 70/30 for me in favour of nostalgia. I like trying new systems and games but it is the classics of my childhood that keep me retro gaming.

Seán Halpin
Nostalgia was originally the fuel that sparked my love for retro gaming as a whole. Nowadays it's more about the curiosity of stuff I've yet to discover over nostalgia. Buying an old system you've never owned before with a bunch of games you've never played? That's exciting.

Steeldrumbands
I honestly don't even like new games... I question if I still like gaming, or if I just like the nostalgia of playing old games. I don't remember the last time I enjoyed playing a game I didn't play as a kid.

Amanda
Nostalgia is definitely my main motivation for retro gaming.

There's no way I'm picking up a game I didn't play on the Sega Mega Drive as a kid, only to be absolutely bested by it as an adult. I can't take that kind of frustration any more!

David Chambers
I just love the whole retro aesthetic – it doesn't matter if I played a game or not in my youth, I enjoy the style and feel of those games.

Lee T
When I first got into emulation around 2001 I loved trying out games that I'd never played before. These days I only really have time to play my old favourites.

ncf1
I enjoy playing the games I loved but also venture out into the worlds of other systems. I have found out in recent years the rather terrifying realisation that those rose-tinted glasses, once firmly welded on have somewhat lost their grip; the games I once felt superior on 'my' systems just plain and simply often aren't. How powerful the nostalgic effect can be!

retro GAMER

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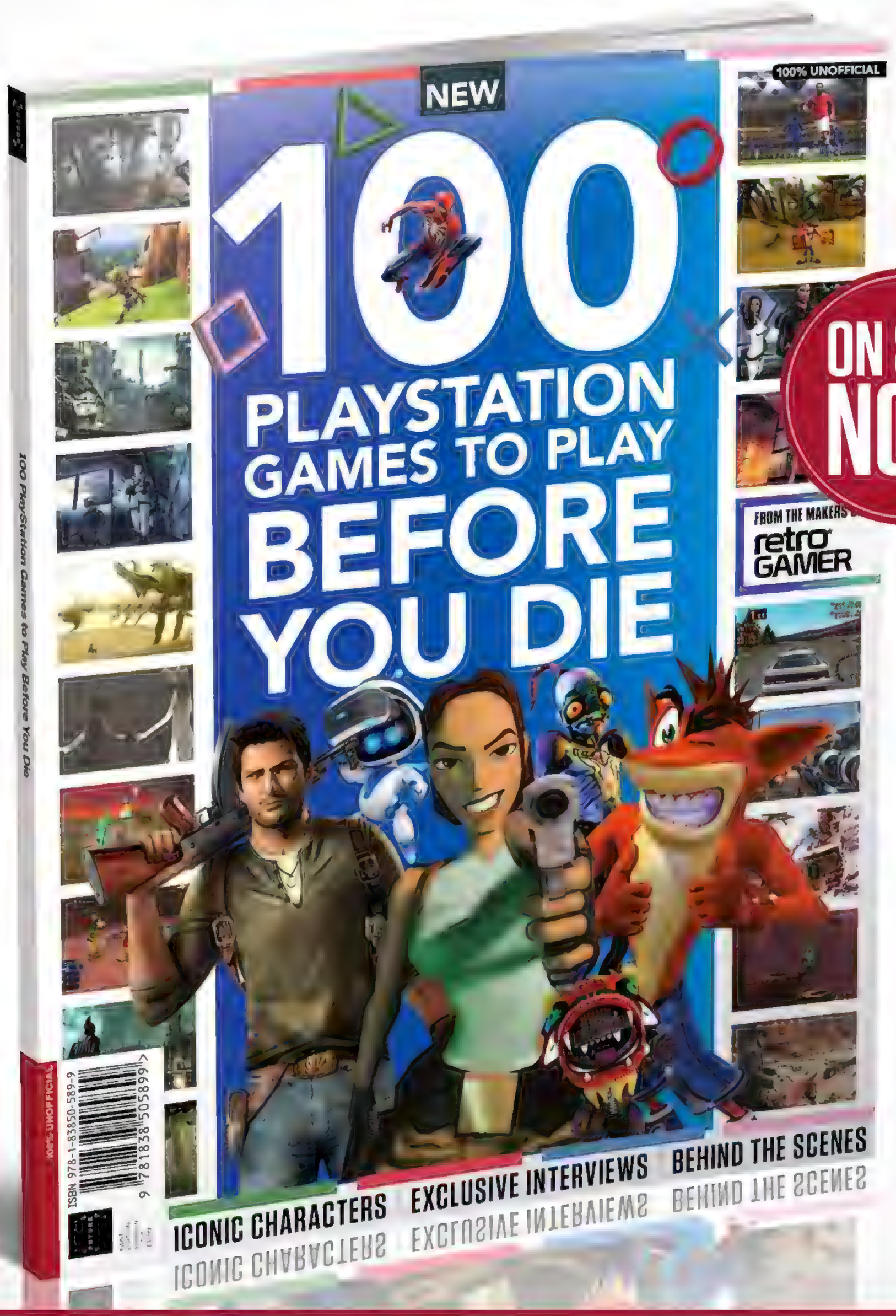

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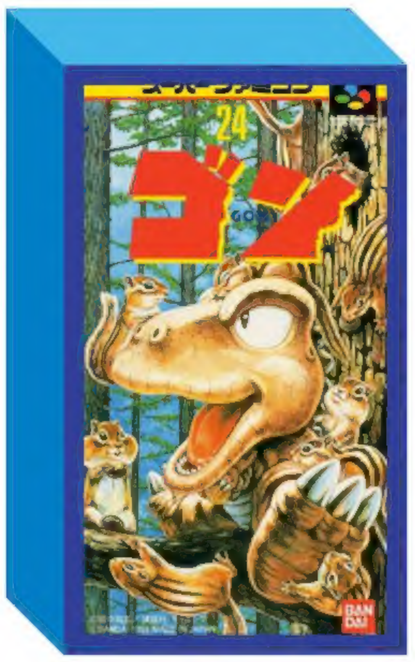


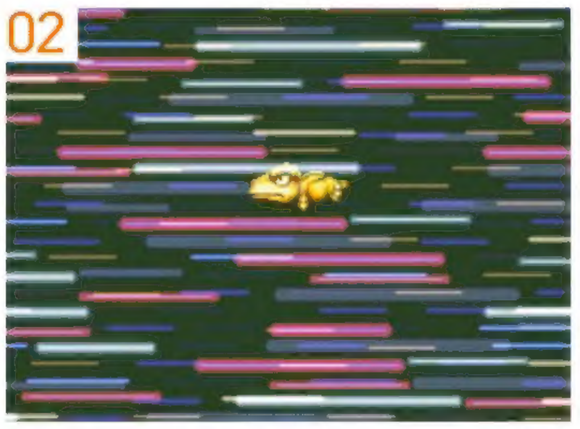
GON

» Hey, you all know Gon, right? Of course, he's that little farting dinosaur fighter who appeared as a secret character in Tekken 3. Well, did you know he starred in a Super Famicom game of his own? Probably not, because it was only released on Japanese shores. He's pretty cool anyway, so let's skip to the end of the game and find out what he did after fighting the final boss, an enormous tyrannosaurus rex...

01

» That big, dumb t-rex slinks off into the sunset, beaten by his tiny rival. Gon might consider the story of David and Goliath, if only he weren't a dinosaur and thus unaware of yet-to-be-written Old Testament fables.

02



» It's time to go home, so Gon jumps into the air at warp speed. Many species of dinosaur could do this, which is how they got here from Mars in the first place, as any paleontologist worth their salt will tell you.

03

» By flapping his arms as he slows down to a subsonic pace, Gon sails through the sky like his evolutionarily divergent friends, the seagulls [careful - Ed]. He's capable of this because dinosaurs are really just retro birds.

04

» Descending to Earth with the kind of grace you'd never expect of a squat little dinosaur, Gon ponders the nature of his next adventure. Maybe he'll go out and taunt some woolly mammoths. Alternatively, he could go and hang out with the herbivores, down in what will eventually become Brighton.

05

» Nope, sod all that. Sometimes, you just need a really good rest after a long and tiring day, so Gon walks over to the tree and immediately falls asleep. Whatever comes next will just have to wait. That's the beauty of a prehistoric lifestyle – no alarm clocks and no obligations. We envy Gon.

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